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THE MINISTER'S SON

THE MINISTER'S SON

OR

HOME WITH HONOURS

BY

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AUTHOR OF

'MISSING PROOFS,' 'GRAHAMS OF INVERMOY, ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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CONTENTS OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. EARLY FRIENDS, ...	1
II. AULD JAMIE, ...	22
III. BREAKING INTO HARNESS, ...	39
IV. MISS FORBES, ...	62
V. "STURM UND DRANG,"	80
VI. THE FIRST SIGHT OF HER, ...	98
VII. UNDER THE SPELL, ...	118
VIII. BEYOND HIS GRASP, ...	139
IX. ON THE BRINK OF DECISION, ...	160
X. THE DIE IS CAST, ...	182
XI. "WOO'D AN' MARRIED AN' A',"	210
XII. FINDING HIS LEVEL, ...	235
XIII. A FRESH START, ...	257
XIV. EASTWARD HO !	283

summary 24 Aug 51 Seattle, W.

THE MINISTER'S SON.



CHAPTER I.

EARLY FRIENDS.

“BAIRN, what book’s that you’re reading?”

“‘Robinson Crusoe,’ mother.”

“‘Robinson Crusoe!’ You’re aye at that. Can ye not read some douce bairn’s story, ‘Tom and his Brother,’ or ‘Charlie’s Home,’ or some of those books ye get from the House, instead of yon wild traveller’s tales?”

“Tam was an awfu’ gowk, mither, and I couldna hae bided in Charlie’s hame,” returned the boy, with a merry twinkle in

his grey eyes; but his mother did not answer the look with her usual kindly smile.

“The tree grows the way the twig’s inclined,” she answered, gravely; “and it would better suit you, a minister’s son, and that are to be a minister yourself, to read different books from that,” and pointing to the offending volume, she turned away and left the room.

The boy laid aside his ‘Crusoe,’ and leaning his arms on the low sill, gazed sadly out of the window—far too sadly for one so young.

“Mother’s vexed again,” he thought—“I know by the sound of her voice. When she’s going about the house of a morning, and all’s right, she speaks almost like the village folk; but when anything’s wrong, she gets to her English. I’m to be a minister; but why shouldn’t I read travels, for all that? or why shouldn’t I be a mis-

sionary and go among the heathen? I'd like it a sight better than stopping in one bit of a place all my days. But it'll have to be as my father wills."

With a deep sigh the child—for he was not more than ten—took up his beloved book again, and was soon lost to everything but the wonders it contained.

This grey-eyed, brown-haired, broad-shouldered boy was Ronald Bennett, the only surviving son of the minister of Tillybodle, and the reader must be introduced somewhat at length to his parents and their surroundings.

Tillybodle was a village lying in the fair carse that stretches along the banks of the River Forth between the Ochills and the Campsie hills,—a region calculated to foster a love of the beautiful in nature, and also that deep-seated feeling so aptly described by the Germans as love of the fatherland, a feeling differing immeasurably

both in strength and nobleness from the narrow and somewhat aggressive sentiment so often miscalled patriotism.

The minister, a man of strong affections, but of iron will, and stern if simple faith, was well able to appreciate the beauties of the spot in which it had been his lot to dwell for fully forty years ; but his calm admiration hardly kept pace with the warmer enthusiasm of his wife.

The daughter of a Perthshire bonnet-laird, Marion Macgregor had a Highlander's passionate nature, schooled and controlled by the circumstances of her life, her husband's quiet example, the duties of her position, and the sacred teachings of sorrow.

It had not been without many an effort and many a secret tear that she had learnt to hold in check the quick temper, the hasty scathing speech, perhaps repented of as soon as uttered ; and even yet, as her son

had shrewdly remarked, the inflections of her voice, no less than her choice of words, betrayed when she was strongly moved.

He was wrong, however, when he associated his mother's English with disapproval alone; her tenderest thoughts, her most earnest prayers, found expression in the tongue which she had learnt slowly and carefully in the Gaelic home, whose language she had wellnigh forgotten.

About the soft Southern tongue clung many memories of her happy girlhood, when she had held her head high among the small farmers and shopkeepers of the district in which she lived. Being unusually well educated, and handsome withal, no one thought it remarkable that she should expect in some way to better her position in the world. But surprise was felt and expressed when it became clear that her one chosen friend was no other than Miss Muriel Campbell, whose father owned miles

of heathery hillside, as well as sundry low-lying farms beside the loch.

Muriel was as lonely in her castle as Marion in the quaint old house of Glen Monach, which stood a little aside from its far more imposing farm-buildings.

Railways had not as yet pierced and terraced the wild hills; and though the castle was usually full of guests in the summer, when communication was easier, there were long months when no visitor ever entered its gates, save the minister, or some adventurous neighbour who, undeterred by rough roads and shortening twilight, rode over to lunch.

It was natural that at these times the young girls should be drawn together, and that an acquaintance which had begun in ordinary neighbourly courtesy should ripen into intimacy.

When Muriel found that this Highland girl in her solitude knew more of many

books than she herself, her pleasure was greater even than her surprise; and as she was of a clinging gentle nature, she soon learnt to lean upon her stronger and more impetuous friend.

Sometimes Marion would hasten over her household work, and having baked her daintiest scones and filled the white jug with her richest cream, would leave the "lassie" to arrange the tea-things while she sat with Muriel in the wide parlour, the fire shining cheerily on the old oak chairs and wainscoted walls, and lighting up the two young faces as the girls drew nearer to the blaze.

Sometimes it was Muriel who played the hostess, and received Marion in her own boudoir, which, in spite of its thick carpet, long sofa, and thin-legged cabinets full of shells, curiosities, and Jacobite relics, was not more comfortable than the picturesque parlour at the Glen.

In the beginning of their friendship it was Muriel who had to make all the advances. Marion met her cordially, and showed evident pleasure in her society, but carefully avoided uttering any word which might suggest that she desired to push herself forward. At last Muriel determined to break through the reserve, which excited in her a corresponding shyness, and begged her to come up to tea at the castle.

Marion coloured brightly, and quietly declined; she would rather not, she said simply, disdaining to invent any excuses.

For a moment Muriel Campbell paused, and a shade of vexation clouded her face; then she placed her hands on her companion's shoulders and said quickly, "If you will not come to me, I shall come to you. I know you have tea now; will you give me a cup?"

"With great pleasure," replied Marion,

and led the way to the parlour, where Miss Campbell allowed her to set out the tea-table with more than the usual display.

Again and yet again did the kindly girl come there, and on each occasion Marion's pride visibly softened.

When she thought she might venture on another step, Miss Campbell asked her suddenly if she used that fine old silver cream-jug every day.

"When we're alone? Oh no," replied Marion; "but we like to honour our guests."

"But I am not a mere guest, Marion; I want to be a friend, if you will only let me. Don't you care for me enough?"

"You know well I care," replied Marion, looking fondly at the delicate pleading face.

"Then if you do, put away that silver jug; give me just the tea you'd have yourself, and don't make me feel that you set me aside because my father is richer than yours. You are horribly proud, Marion!"

The girls gazed at each other for a moment in silence, then to Muriel's dismay Marion quietly left the room.

She returned presently, however, with a plain white jug, into which she poured the cream, and setting it down, remarked demurely—

“That's my worst jug—it's cracked; I hope you're satisfied.”

“Perfectly: you are a dear girl. Give me a bit of scone now, please, for I'm hungry.”

The meal went on merrily after this; and as Muriel was leaving, she asked in a matter-of-fact tone—

“When are you coming to tea with me, Marion? will Wednesday do?”

Marion laughed. “You get your own way; and it's no to be wondered at. Well, I'd like to see you at home, and I'll come if I'm to see nobody but yourself.”

“Mamma is an invalid, as you know. Papa is sure to be busy; and besides, he

never comes to my boudoir. There are no visitors, and you'll come early and stay late," said Muriel.

Marion Macgregor obeyed this imperious command, and that Wednesday was but the first of many pleasant meetings.

She kept to her determination, and avoided the castle when guests were there; but more than once Miss Campbell took a favoured friend to the Glen, on the plea of seeing the view, and on these occasions Marion would give them tea under a spreading sycamore before the door.

A certain Sir Duncan Forbes came among others to the castle, and Muriel was too much absorbed in the pleasure of his society to observe that a young Englishman who was also of the party had found his way more than once to the Glen.

He was handsome and light-hearted, and thought only of the pleasure of the moment

when, with a few graceful phrases and some genuine praise of her beautiful home and her gentle friend, he made the first step towards awaking Marion's slumbering heart.

Soon he discovered that hers was a nature such as he had never before known, and his idle admiration changed to a warmer feeling; so that he exerted all his skill and wit to please her, and succeeded only too well.

Once and again he joined her where she loitered among the birches by the burnside. The warm sunshine seemed to wrap them round, and visions of a wonderful future began to float before the girl's eyes—visions destined to fade as quickly as they had been born.

Nothing occurred to disturb her dreaming until Muriel's intended marriage to Sir Duncan Forbes was announced, and then indeed she laid aside reserve and pride, and made her way to the castle as

often as she could, for a few minutes' chat with her whom she was so soon to lose. Almost before she had realised the impending change in her life, the wedding-day had come, and Muriel was gone.

Marion was ill at ease that night, and cared little for the ball at which the tenants as well as the gentry of the neighbourhood assembled.

The young Englishman was there still; but he, too, was depressed and unlike himself—nor was it long before Marion knew the reason.

He was to leave the castle next day, and he must bid her farewell. This he told her in the shadow of a temporary porch, gay with evergreens and flowers, where he led her unobserved by the dancers thronging to the gay tumult of the Houlachan.

"You can't mean it," gasped the girl, leaning back against the branches for support.

Then her companion spoke out bravely, if too tardily. He did not attempt to defend himself, but craved her forgiveness for having yielded to the sweet temptation of her presence, when he should rather have fled from her.

Marry her he could not—he could only hope that she would forget him, and that speedily. He tried to hang about her neck a locket from his watch-chain; but she spurned the gift, even while she clung to him in all the agony of her disappointment and dread of loneliness. Fortunately perhaps, there was wounded pride too in her heart, which helped her, after those bitter moments were over, to keep her place through the evening, and smile and dance like the rest.

She could not send back some beautifully bound volumes which reached her a week later, with no clue to their donor save a small initial on the fly-leaf, that no eye but

her own observed. The thought that she had been remembered brought some comfort to her aching heart, and by-and-by the healthful discipline of daily duties and household cares wrought upon her, so that she came to regard that short season of love as a wonderful interlude, a beautiful vision, apart from the routine of any possible life.

Nevertheless the old monotonous existence was often intolerably irksome to her active spirit, and she missed Muriel Campbell's frequent visits sorely.

When, therefore, through the influence of Sir Duncan Forbes and his bride, a certain James Bennett was presented to the little kirk nearest Glen Monach, Marion was interested in him, because he had lately seen and spoken to her friend, whose new home was in the parish of which his father was the minister.

The young man, on his side, admired the

erect figure and easy gait of this handsome Highland girl as she went out after her father's cows, and wondered that her large grey eyes were always so cold and calm.

The time came, by-and-by, when they were not cold to him ; and when Marion quitted her home and entered the tiny manse as a wife, she believed that she was giving her heart truly with her hand, for she had ceased to think of that other brief episode in her life, except in so far as each one of us thinks tenderly of a first fancy. Yet it had left its impress on her character, for it had given her a glimpse of the romance of love. She was content now with James Bennett's quiet wooing ; but in some future day of trouble, her warmer nature might long for a franker affection, and driven back upon itself, might recall that fair dream with regret.

When Bennett's father died, he received a call from the little congregation of Tilly-

bodle, and with a contented mind took possession of the home of his boyhood.

His wife, too, was glad, for the Forbes's estate of Inverallan Hall lay close at hand ; and since her marriage, many a kindly letter and thoughtful gift had proved that Lady Forbes had not forgotten her girlish friendship.

She and her husband were away on a visit when the Bennetts arrived, but everything had been made ready for them by her orders ; and the pots of ferns and flowers, no less than the fresh cream and hot rolls, showed how carefully she had thought over every detail that should make a pleasant welcome in their home.

The preparations were superintended by Mrs Simpson, the old housekeeper at the Hall, who was not a little surprised at their extent, and was consequently the more curious to see the new-comers.

She was a stately personage, far more

imposing in appearance than her young mistress, and prided herself justly on the possession of many excellent qualities—on none more than on her power of keeping herself and others in their proper places.

She had known James Bennett's homely parents well, and had been a favoured visitor at the manse, where, when the family was away and she had time on her hands, she loved to drink a cup of tea. Old Mrs Bennett had been well pleased to hear of the doings of the gentry at the Hall; and the minister himself, worthy man, was not averse to a good story or a genial bit of gossip.

Now Mrs Simpson held, that as things have been, so they should continue to be. She hated change, and suspected evil in every new custom—just as she believed that a new sauce must be bad for the stomach, and that the palate that enjoyed it must be in an unhealthy condition.

She took it for granted that the new minister and his wife would be like the old, friendly, quiet folk, not altogether at their ease on the periodic occasions when they dined at the Hall.

The fact that young Mrs Bennett came from Lady Forbes's neighbourhood, accounted to some extent for the preparations made in the manse, but she was quite unaware that any intimacy existed between the two.

When, therefore, she had allowed a couple of days for "settling down," Mrs Simpson arrayed herself in the silk gown and Paisley shawl that in those days were considered handsome, and walked slowly down to the manse. Mr Bennett received her with kindness, remembering her well, and introduced her to his wife, who was also perfectly kindly and courteous, and at once offered her tea. But though she stayed and drank one and another cup,

Mrs Simpson was not satisfied with her visit. She could not have told what it was that displeased her, for even she could not say that Mrs Bennett gave herself airs or behaved in any way unfittingly. All she could and did say to her friend the butler was, that she "couldn't make them out,—maybe they were just strange."

The mystery was explained next day, when Lady Forbes having arrived, drove straight from the station to the manse, met and embraced Mrs Bennett half-way up the garden-path, and carried her off at once to lunch at the Hall, "where she's talking away about the pictures, and the china, and gimcracks, and as much at home as my lady herself," quoth the butler, when he came down-stairs.

Poor Mrs Simpson never got over the shock of this discovery, and with touchy unreasonableness declared that she had been made to disgrace herself, and never

would she enter the manse again. That she, a woman that knew how folk should conduct themselves, should have gone and drunk tea with a friend of her "leddyship's," was a slip she could not forget; and judging others by herself, she always believed that the ladies must have laughed together over her blunder. To Mrs Bennett she owed an especial grudge; "for," said she, "she might surely hae tauld me she kenned her ledyship sae weel;" and this omission she never could forgive.

CHAPTER II

AULD JAMIE.

VERY pleasant were the relations between the manse and the Hall as time rolled on ; and very truly did Marion, with her happy bairns at her knee, sympathise with the childless wife, whose riches could not compensate for the lack of childish voices in her house.

The weight of a silence that has never been broken is easier to bear, however, than the terrible silence of loss, which fell upon the manse just when the rosy faces were beginning to brighten with intelligence, and father and mother speculated on the

capacity and probable future of each little learner.

It was during a wet spring that a low fever broke out in the village; and the minister, in the stifling rooms from which the health-giving air was carefully excluded, spent his strength in his attendance on the sick and dying. He took the infection first; and though Lady Forbes carried the two children away at once to the Hall, they sickened and died before their father could leave his room. Desolation fell upon the parents; and when a baby's cry was again heard within the walls, the mother held down, with all her strong will, the passion of love that welled up in her heart—"for," said she, "who knows if he may be spared to me?"

He was spared, and grew to be a vigorous, bright boy, the last and dearest of her flock; but the repression of her love became so far habitual, that it was only now and

again that it shone forth in its full force. Ordinarily she was a kind, but not a demonstrative parent.

When Ronald Bennett was two years old, Lady Forbes gave birth to a daughter ; and a few nights later a carriage drove up in haste to the manse, and a thundering knock roused the inmates from their slumbers. Lady Forbes was dying, — would Mrs Bennett come at once—not a moment was to be lost. Marion was at the Hall as rapidly as possible, and was met at the foot of the stairs by the old housekeeper.

“You’ll not stay long, Mrs Bennett ; Sir Duncan and the doctor are both there,” she said in a low tone.

“I shall do whatever is needful,” returned Marion, and sped past her, unheeding her angry eyes. It was not till all was over that she drove away again ; and for many a night she would wake from her sleep, and hear in fancy the faint voice

whispering, "Love my baby, Marion : tell her of me—often." She had given the required promise earnestly ; and because of it, and for the sake of her faithful friendship for his wife, Sir Duncan, who had no relative to whom he chose to intrust her, allowed his little girl to be continually at the manse as time went on.

Upon her Marion Bennett lavished freely all the caresses which were sparingly bestowed on her own boy ; nor did it seem strange to him that it should be so. Had he not been taught from his earliest infancy to treat her as a little queen might have been treated ? Had she not driven him about,—made him in turn her horse, her dog, her protector when the sullen watchdog frightened her, and had he not obeyed implicitly her pretty baby tyranny ? Once indeed he had hurt her in his play, and she had cried, whereupon his mother had gathered her lovingly in her arms, saying

gravely to him, "Ronald, you must never make Muriel cry, for she has no mother to kiss her;" and the reproof sank deep into his childish heart, so that he shed tears himself at the thought of his own cruelty.

As he grew older he began to attend the village day-school, and in doing so learnt more than the dominie taught. He was a high-spirited boy, always ready for mischief, and clever enough to make up easily for the time he wasted, so that his position in his classes remained a fair one. His master, therefore, had no ground of complaint; yet he knew that if mischief of any sort were brewing, Ronald Bennett would be in the midst of it, and he lived in expectation of some outburst that would entail a serious rebuke. Unhappily, his new associates speedily influenced the boy for the worse: he had plunged from the restraints of a strict home into the comparative liberty of school, and his accent, his manners, his

very clothes, gave evidence of the change. He would talk the broadest native Doric, especially if Mrs Simpson happened to pass him in the village street. He would wander away on half-holidays, roaming over the hills with companions who cared for neither fences nor keepers, and sometimes brought home eggs that no barn-door fowl had laid. He did not guess that his mother said sternly to herself, as she watched him, that she must arm herself to meet disappointment, if not sorrow, in the future. Only to little Muriel Forbes was the boy as gentle as ever, and the child would call him "Ronny dear," and run to meet him joyously, nor would any temptation induce him to leave her, if she begged him to stay. Once a boy considerably older than he, jeered at him for remaining behind "wi' yon bit Forbes lassie" when the others set off for a ramble ; but Ronald, with a bound, struck him full on the mouth, so that his lip was

cut open. "Take that!" he cried, furiously; "and never let me hear a word like that from you again!"

Ronald, like his mother when in anger, had "gotten to his English," and somehow the bully did not care to face him in his wrath. Young as they were, the boys recognised dimly that the name of a tiny girl had fired a chivalrous indignation in the one, as it had prompted a thoughtless insult from the other.

Unfortunately, Ronald's love for tales of travel and adventure led him to frequent the one cottage in the village which those in authority over him would have thought the most unsuitable.

Jamie Paterson was a shoemaker by trade, —a clever workman when he chose to exert himself, though his hand was not so steady or his eye so clear as of old. He was a short, broad-shouldered fellow, with unkempt black hair, and a red nose that be-

trayed his besetting weakness. No matter at what hour he was seen, a black cutty-pipe was between his teeth, and some of his cronies vowed he slept with it in his mouth, and smoked when others snored. His dark and dingy shop was a rendezvous for all idlers; for Jamie would put aside his work at any moment to enjoy "a crack," and loved nothing better than to recount his experiences "in the colony," as he called Australia, including in the tale the awful misfortunes and gigantic losses which had sent him home as poor as when he emigrated.

His glory as a traveller, however, was somewhat diminished after an occasion when a returned settler, passing through Tillyboddle, recognised him through the open window, and joined the idlers round his bench.

Perhaps Jamie did not love rivalry on his own ground, or perhaps he disliked his visitor; whatever the cause, he treated him cavalierly. The stranger nevertheless main-

tained his friendly tone, as though innocent of any cause of offence ; but when he rose to go, he glanced round the low-roofed cottage and observed—

“ I see you’re just the man you were, Jamie—no a bit better aff than when ye——”

“ Whisht, man, whisht !” exclaimed Jamie, uneasily ; but the listeners, scenting a secret, pressed the stranger to speak and tell them what he knew.

“ Oh, it’s no mickle. Jamie here says the colony’s the land o’ true leeberty ; but I’m thinkin’ he didna find it sae, that’s a’,” replied he, laughing.

“ Go on, go on,”—“ I aye had my doobts aboot him,” cried one and another.

“ Weel, ye see, oot yonder folk dinna stan’ at the street-corners like ye do here—they’ve owre mickle on hand ; and if a lad’s seen idlin’, the police speir at him whaur he’s frae and what’s his business. Our freend

Jamie here was aye fond o' a drap, and he gaed through the streets o' our bit toun ae while owre aften, and—dinna rin, Jamie, man—and the police jist gruppit him, and gied him saxty days,—that's hoo he cam hame wi' a toom purse, for he wadna bide aifter; he said he'd gang hame to auld Scotland, whaur a man can dauner aboot as lang's he likes."

A roar of laughter greeted this statement, and for some days, if the shoemaker was seen at his usual lounging-places, he was met with sly allusions and broad jests.

Nevertheless the effect of the stranger's visit soon wore off. After all, supposing Jamie had been in jail, nobody else in Tillybodle had travelled so far or could while away an hour so pleasantly. Even a jail may confer a dignity on its prisoner, in rustic eyes, if it is sufficiently far off! Jamie therefore resumed his sway over the village, though on less autocratic terms

than heretofore, since a hint as to the cause of his misfortunes would always moderate his humours.

He was a great power in the country-side, as laird and minister knew well. His free-thinking speeches and dry wit made him a favourite, and wives and mothers sighed when they heard their men-folk say of an afternoon, "Let's gang up to Jamie's for a wee while," for they knew that the effect on the domestic atmosphere would be what Englishwomen call "up-setting."

"When my man comes hame, he thinks he kens hoo a' the warld suld be managed, and wad lay doon the law to the Queen hersel; but I aye tell him he canna manage his ain tongue, for he flytes at me and misca's the bairns maist awfu'! it's real angersome!" exclaimed one of these much-enduring matrons.

"Weel, weel, woman, ye maun jist mak' the best o't: them that's got a man in the

hooose maun aye be pittin' up with ae thing or anither," replied another, of more resigned character.

"I dinna see the sense o' that ava. What for suld a man no be ceevil as weel's a woman? My man was ceevil eneuch whan he was young."

"Losh, woman, it's the way they're made! They're helpless bodies aboot a hooose, and they ken that weel eneuch; sae it's nae wonder they're ceevil whan they're coortin' a lass. But it's anither tale they tell whan ye're marrit to them. We a' ken that, and what's the use o' grumlin'?"

"Weel, if I'd my way, Jamie Paterson wad get leave to quit."

"And what guid wad that dae? If it wasna him it wad be anither, and care aye comes o' clashes. Keep a quiet sough, lass. Jamie's no sae bad as ye think," replied the goodwife, turning in at her own door.

She was quite right in her estimate of

the worthy with whom Ronald Bennett held many a stolen interview. To Jamie's credit be it said, he did the boy less harm than might have been expected, for there was something in the look of the frank young eyes that often checked a foul story on his lips.

On a certain afternoon, when his mother had again rebuked Ronald for his choice of books, he stole out and round to the patch of ground—it could not be called a garden—behind the shoemaker's cottage.

Jamie was leaning on the low wall of his pigsty, his shirt open at the throat, his heavy shoes unlaced, his pipe between his teeth, his untidy and “throughhither” figure suiting well with the dilapidated pigsty, the black and weedy ground, where old kail-runts and sodden potato-shaws gave evidence of thriftless waste.

“How's the pig, Jamie?” inquired Ronald, jumping the broken fence and coming up.

“No weel,” replied the man, without moving; and indeed, how could it do well, poor beast, living, as it did, in a perpetual sea of mud? Pigs are by nature cleaner than many of their masters.

“No weel,” he repeated; “it’s an eldritch brute. Wad ye believe it! it’s capseezed its trough yonder, and shoved it up forenent the wa’; and yonder it was, stannin’ on the tap o’t, routin’ doun thae tiles frae aff the roof—it’s deevilitch!”

“What an awful-like beast!” said Ronald, laughing at the speaker’s serious countenance; but Jamie did not smile.

“Ye ken thae folk that believe in transmigration o’ souls—some kind o’ Indians, are they no?”

“Ay—Brahmins,” replied Ronald, wisely.

“Weel, yon’s the kind o’ animal wad suit my soul, I’m thinkin’: it’s jist as restless as me, and as ne’er-do-weel,” said Jamie gravely, knocking the ashes out of his pipe,

and turning back to the cottage. Some gleam of regret had touched him, as Ronald saw with surprise ; but it passed as quickly as it came, and, perhaps all the more readily because of it, Jamie dropped in to the Rob Roy that night and had a drop as usual. Happily the good influence was yet on him while Ronald broached the subject of his troubles.

“ Jamie, they’re aye tellin’ me at home that I maun be a minister, and I dinna like it.”

“ What for no ?” said the shoemaker, peering at him from below his shaggy eyebrows.

“ What for no ?—well, would ye like it yersel, Jamie ?”

“ Dinna even yersel wi’ me, laddie,” replied Paterson, sternly.

“ I know you’re clever, and I’m not,” said Ronald humbly, and quite mistaking the other’s meaning ; “ and it’s partly because I’m no clever enough that I can’t

thole it." Ronald's talk was a curious mixture of English and Lowland Scotch.

"Humph! ye'll hae as mickle wit in your brain-pan as mony a chiel that wags his heid in a poopit," quoth Jamie.

"But I tell ye I don't want to wag my my heid in a poopit, as ye call it. I want to travel and see life a bit," replied the boy.

His shrewd companion detected the note of affectation in his manner.

"See life, said ye?—see life indeed! I've seen life, bairn, mair nor ye'll ever get a sicht o', and ye ken weel eneuch what's come o't. D'ye think I dinna ken, when a' the folk come to listen to auld Jamie's clashes, that there's no ae decent lad amang them? No ane o' them will hae a plack to lay by when they're getting auld. They're grand at haverin' wi' a body like me, but havers winna cleed nor feed ye. Ay, ye may glower. It's no aften ye catch me

speakin' this way; but when a bairn like you ettles at seein' life, it gars me tak' a thocht. Gang awa' to the colony—it's a gran' place for folk that keep frae drink—keep yer sheep or yer cattle, and mak' yer siller like yon lad that cam hame to see Jamie Paterson as fuschionless an auld fule as he was thretty years sinsyne, but dinna tell me ye want to see life. Yer mither had better pit the mools abune ye beside the ither bairns in the kirkyaird. Gang yer ways hame, laddie; I'm for nae mair o' ye the noo," said Paterson vehemently, striding into the back room, where, as he threw himself on a rickety chair, he exclaimed, "Losh me, it's the pig that's dune it!"

CHAPTER III.

BREAKING INTO HARNESS.

LITTLE Muriel passed a part of each year with her father's mother and maiden sister, and the latter was not altogether pleased with her niece's continual reference to Ronald Bennett, and thought it her duty to write to Sir Duncan on the subject. Her letter was characteristically brief and to the point:—

“MY DEAR DUNCAN,” she began, “are you aware that Muriel is constantly with the minister's son at the manse, and even elsewhere? I do not think that he can be a fitting companion for her. Mamma was sur-

prised and grieved to find that she actually was glad to go away from us in order to see him again. I think it will indeed be well that I should keep house for you, as was proposed, so as to look after the poor child.—Your affectionate sister,

“ALICIA FORBES.

“*P.S.*—Of course I know your poor wife had a romantic friendship for Mrs Bennett, but there is no reason that it should go on to another generation.”

Sir Duncan's reply to this note was more clear-sighted than judicious ; but he was a man who carried no weapons with which to defend himself against a persistent woman :

“MY DEAR ALICIA,—I suppose in the eyes of some women any feminine creature, be she eight years old or eighty, is capable of flirtation. The belief argues the posses-

sion of knowledge founded on experience. Don't be angry with me ; I really cannot answer you otherwise when you take exception to the companionship of a couple of children. No wonder Muriel likes to return. My mother's quiet house is depressing for so young a child, and Ronald is a kind and trusty playmate. I myself have a great liking and respect for his mother.

“ As I told you before, you are welcome to come here whenever you choose ; but understand, I will have nothing done that can in any way wound or annoy Mrs Bennett.—Your affectionate brother,

“ DUNCAN FORBES.”

Miss Forbes read this reply twice carefully, and then locked it up in her desk for future reference.

“ Poor dear Duncan,” she thought, “ he is no wiser than the rest of his sex. Could any one but a man have written such a note !

Does he suppose I mean to quarrel with Mrs Bennett? On the contrary, I shall be most friendly towards her. I must, of course, get a governess for the child, and it will go hard if she and I together cannot quietly counteract the manse influence. I suspect, too, that I have an ally already at work in the person of worthy Mrs Simpson. She has more feeling for the dignity of the family than Duncan, who is almost as infatuated about those people as his wife was."

Poor Mrs Simpson little knew how completely her antipathy to the Bennetts had been betrayed to the ladies of the manse and Inverallan,—not, as she imagined, by the talk and laughter which must have followed on her blundering visit, but by turns of phrase and tones of her own voice, which expressed volumes. Neither Lady Forbes nor Mrs Bennett ever dreamt of discussing her, yet each knew of her dislike, and now

Miss Forbes showed herself equally clear-sighted.

When, after the death of his wife, Sir Duncan frequently consulted Mrs Bennett rather than Mrs Simpson on trifles that concerned the baby, and even allowed the child to remain for some weeks at the manse, he added fuel to the fire of the housekeeper's wrath; and it would hardly be accusing her unjustly to say that she rejoiced to hear in after-days of Ronald's escapades. It seemed as if, after years of patient waiting, she would be able at last to exclaim, "I tell't you sae,—I tell't ye nae guid cu'd come o' thae folk."

No one was more conscious of her enmity than Ronald himself; and, as has been said, he lost no opportunity of provoking it, not being as yet aware that it is often wisest to conciliate a foe, especially if that foe be a woman. Yet what harm could an old woman like Mrs Simpson do to a boy like

him? Her angry glances and air of dignity amused him, and, boy-like, he let her see his laughter. No wonder that she thought him rude, and unfit to associate with the laird's bairn: she could not know that his boisterous fun was never seen when Muriel was by.

Little Muriel's education had as yet been of a somewhat haphazard description: lessons, during her visit to her aunt, had been a fruitful source of discord; and from the frank account she gave of her own behaviour, Mrs Bennett could easily perceive that Miss Forbes must have imagined her to be far more ignorant than she really was.

"It is very wrong of you, bairnie," she would say: "you should not vex your aunt; and besides, you will make her think that I have taught you very badly. She knows that you come every day to me for lessons, so she will blame me for your ignorance."

“ Oh, dear mamsie, I never meant that ! Oh, if I had thought of that, I would have been so good ! ”

“ You see, if you are naughty you do more harm than you know of, bairnie. Now don't talk any more, but learn your history, like a douce wee woman.”

The little face would turn resolutely to the book after this appeal, and the lesson, which no argument of aunt Alicia's could extort from the child, would be said with eager interest to “ mamsie.”

These two, in fact, understood each other perfectly ; and the child's voice was never so sweet as in uttering the pet name her baby lips had invented, nor were Mrs Bennett's grey eyes ever so tender as when she looked fondly in those of her dead friend's daughter. Her very tone was softer in addressing her ; and it is impossible to put on paper that pathetic inflection, that quaint combination of English words and

refined Highland accent, which, when once heard, can never be forgotten.

Her studies over, a maid arrived daily to fetch Muriel ; but it was a bright morning for her if Ronald came straight back from school and would play with her for half an hour before she went home.

It was on the day when a second letter had arrived from Miss Forbes for Sir Duncan, that Ronald, unconscious of the opposition in store for him, met the child just as she had passed the village school.

“ Oh, Ronny, do come to the fall with me ! ” cried she, running up to him ; and nothing loath, he agreed.

The waterfall in question was the children's favourite haunt : a little burn foamed over a steep rock and formed at its base a good-sized pool, deep enough to be fascinating without being actually dangerous. Two bent and gnarled rowans almost met across the pool, and their branches made

delightful seats, all the more charming because the brown water was below them. A few yards lower down the burn was spanned by a small but ancient bridge, over whose steep arch a footpath led from the village to the Hall.

Muriel's maid was so accustomed to the children's play that she paid little heed to them, and amused herself by gathering blackberries while they scrambled about the pool.

The child's great delight was to slide out as far as she dared on the rowan-branch; while Ronald, wading below, steadied her on her perch. On this particular morning, either she was more adventurous than usual, or less careful in her hold; and just as Mrs Simpson chanced to appear on the bridge, Muriel slipped, and, uttering a shriek, fell, dragging Ronald with her. Not much harm ensued; for the boy quickly recovered his balance, and lifted Muriel, who was a slight child, on to the nearest rock in a moment,

and thence to the bank, before the nurse and Mrs Simpson reached the spot.

"Gude guide us, Miss Muriel, ye nicht hae been drooned ! What laddie's yon that's wi' ye ?" cried Mrs Simpson, who knew him perfectly well, even before he turned to her with a mock profound bow.

"So it's Mrs Bennett's bairn. My certie, if that's the gait you guide Miss Muriel, the laird will let ye hear o't ! What a place to pit a young leddy in ! Ye ought to be ashamed o' yoursel," cried the housekeeper, really frightened, but also secretly pleased at this chance of rebuking the boy she disliked. "As for you," she continued, turning to the maid, "I'll just let the laird ken that you were awa' pu'ing berries when you should have been bringing the young leddy hame, instead of leaving her daunderin' here wi' yon ill-mannered laddie Ronald Bennett."

During this tirade Muriel had remained

standing, with bewildered eyes scanning the three faces beside her ; now she asserted herself unexpectedly.

“ Mrs Simpson, I’m quite sure if papa were here you would not speak so to Ronny, and I shall tell him so. I’m not a bit hurt, and very little wet, only my frock, just because Ronny picked me up so quick. If papa chooses me to play with him, you can have nothing to say against it.”

If a thunderbolt had fallen at the house-keeper’s feet she could not have been more surprised, and she remained speechless, while Muriel begged Ronald to come up with her at once and see her father. Ronald, however, refused. “ I’ve got nothing to say to him ; and besides, I’m going home,” he replied, gently ; then with a change of voice and expression that completed poor Muriel’s astonishment, he turned to Mrs Simpson. “ I’ll wuss ye gude day,” said he, in a tone that sounded like mimicry of her own ;

and with a laugh and a leap, he was up the bank and away in a moment.

Before an hour was over, Sir Duncan heard from his daughter and his house-keeper two very different accounts of the morning's adventure; and though he quietly and decidedly took the children's part, he was conscious of a faint doubt, a suspicion, that there might be some cause for his sister's remarks. He would at least inquire: perhaps Ronald Bennett was not as satisfactory a boy as his mother's son ought to have been.

The very next day he strolled down to the manse, saying that he would bring Miss Muriel home himself. He timed his arrival so as to pass the school just as it "scaled;" and he observed that among the noisiest boys who burst out of its doors was Bennett, who, the moment he caught sight of Sir Duncan's tall, spare figure, seemed bent on shouting and pushing more violently than

before. His hair was rough, his waistcoat half buttoned, his tie awry, and certainly he looked a strange companion for the dainty little lady from the Hall.

Sir Duncan, however, went up to him and held out his hand. "My boy," said he, in his pleasant voice, "I have to thank you heartily for saving Muriel from a nasty fall yesterday: she told me how quick you were. It was a mercy you were with her."

Ronald coloured to his temples as he looked straight in Sir Duncan's face. "Perhaps I shouldn't have let her go so far out, Sir Duncan; but she liked it, and I didn't think there was any fear of her falling. You might be angry with me, I think, instead of thanking me."

Sir Duncan smiled. "No, indeed; I could hardly expect you to be wiser than your years. If any one was to blame, it was the maid. I'm going on to the manse for Muriel now,—are you coming?"

“ Yes, Sir Duncan.”

“ Come along, then. I am going to tell your mother that Miss Forbes is coming to live at the Hall. Who is that tall boy on the other side there ? Is he a friend of yours ? ”

“ Tom Paterson,” replied Ronald, rather shyly, not replying to the last question. Tom was one of the most incorrigible boys in the village ; and just now, in passing, he had called out roughly to Ronald, who felt annoyed, without clearly knowing why.

“ Paterson, the brother of that poor fellow that has ruined himself with drink ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Ah, the boy looks a rough fellow too. It is a great pity ; that whole family has gone wrong for want of spirit enough to go right,” said Sir Duncan, with a glance at the drooping head beside him. He suspected that he was delivering a home-thrust, and was careful to speak, not as a critic, but as one friend to another. “ How’s your

mother, Ronald ? has she had any more of her bad colds ?” he continued.

The boy looked up brightly, and before the two had reached the manse, Sir Duncan had obtained an insight into points of Ronald’s character that neither the quiet, reserved minister, nor even Mrs Bennett herself, had been able to gain.

“The lad’s a gentleman,” thought Sir Duncan, as he reached the door, “but he ought to be out of that school. Tom Pater-son’s no companion for him. I can quite imagine that Mrs Simpson doesn’t like him.”

Muriel’s lessons were over, but she gladly ran off with Ronald till her father should be ready ; and Sir Duncan noticed the gentle, protecting way in which he spoke to her. Was Miss Forbes right, after all, in thinking that the children should not be so much together ?

“How old is Ronald, Mrs Bennett ?” he inquired.

"Thirteen, Sir Duncan," she replied, wondering at the question, till she observed the direction of her companion's eyes.

"Too old to be at a mere village school, is he not?"

"Perhaps; but his father supplements the teaching, and I see no reason for parting with him till he goes to Edinburgh."

"Has he settled on his profession yet?"

"You know that his father has settled on one for him; he will be a minister."

"Are you really keeping to that intention?" exclaimed Sir Duncan, looking up in surprise. "It is long now since we have spoken of it."

"Why not? There's many a good, quiet man has been full of life and spirit as a boy. His father's heart is set upon it, and—I couldn't spare him to anything else," she added, sharply.

"I don't wonder at your thinking you could not, but I confess Ronald does not

look to me as though he were cut out for the ministry. However, I did not come to talk of him, but, as usual, of myself," said Sir Duncan, smiling. "My sister intends taking up her abode for a while at the Hall."

"Indeed! that will be a great change for you—and Muriel," said Mrs Bennett, visibly startled.

"It will. The fact is, Alicia has talked my mother into thinking that Muriel requires more constant supervision than I can give, or you either, as you are not in the house with her; and I daresay there is some truth in what they say. Alicia insists on a governess for the child."

"Miss Forbes is right, Sir Duncan; and indeed I was thinking of proposing something of the kind myself."

"Were you? That is a relief to my mind, for I feared you would dislike the plan as much as I do."

“So I do; but I think it right, for all that. Muriel is too much with servants, and wants more and better teaching than mine. But the light will be gone out of my day when I do not see her!”

“But you will see her constantly, Mrs Bennett.”

“Not if Miss Forbes is at the Hall. I have been more grateful to you than I can tell you, for letting me see so much of the bairn—*her* bairn; but I knew a parting must come some day, and perhaps it is as well that it should come suddenly. Miss Forbes dislikes me, Sir Duncan—well, almost as much as your housekeeper does,” replied Mrs Bennett, with a twinkle in her grey eyes.

“Jealousy in both cases, I think, isn’t it? Well, you and I are old enough friends to speak frankly to each other. I am very glad you think I am being made to act wisely, and I shall trust to your telling

me if you see any signs of Muriel being unhappy. She will confide her troubles to you."

"I should speak if I thought it absolutely needful, Sir Duncan, but not otherwise. The bairn must learn to fit her place; but it will be a hard lesson for her, poor lamb! When does Miss Forbes come?"

"Early next week, I fancy," replied Sir Duncan, so ruefully that Mrs Bennett laughed.

"You must school yourself, or you'll never school Muriel," she said, and Sir Duncan laughed too. It was no secret that he dreaded his sister's imperious ways, and indeed during his whole life he had yielded to her, except when she had once attempted to tyrannise over his wife; it was on that occasion that she had found it best to leave the Hall, and she had thereafter invariably spoken of her brother as "poor dear Duncan," so that strangers would have

imagined him to be a miserably henpecked husband.

The children accepted the impending change in their lives characteristically. Muriel shed passionate tears, and clung to mamsie as though her heart would break; yet, after a long talk with her, went home full of good resolves, which were instantly put to the proof.

"You'll no be at the manse sae often noo, Miss Muriel," said Mrs Simpson; "an' maybe Sir Duncan will entertain mair folk when there's a leddy in the hoose. You'll sune see what they think o' an ill-mannered callant like Ronald Bennett."

"I don't care what anybody thinks," said Muriel, stamping her little foot.

"Vera weel, missie: your aunt'll no think mickle o' what you've learnt frae Mrs Bennett, I warrant ye, when she hears ye talk like that."

"But Mrs Bennett always blames me

when I'm cross, and I'll tell aunt Alicia so. I must try to be good, because Mrs Bennett says I ought," replied Muriel, so tearfully that Mrs Simpson for a moment repented that she had teased her, and tried to soothe her with the promise of a cake, which Muriel accepted politely, and cared for but little.

Ronald heard of the advent of Miss Forbes and the governess with dismay and dislike. His boyish independence resented fiercely the slightest hint which implied an assertion of superiority in the person who uttered it. Miss Forbes had spoken to him two or three times in his life, and on each occasion his dislike of her had deepened, for she addressed him as though he belonged to a different world. No doubt the governess would be a person of the same sort; and Ronald felt that, even in order to see Muriel, he could hardly endure to face her aunt. Moreover, he knew that he would miss

the child terribly; and therefore, with the strange reserve that was natural to him, he scarcely allowed a word of regret to escape him respecting the abandonment of her daily visits.

Perhaps but for Sir Duncan's judicious remarks he might have thrown himself more completely into Tom Paterson's hands; but he could not forget either the strange warning that Jamie had given him when he spoke of seeing life, nor yet Sir Duncan's graphic phrase, "Gone wrong for want of spirit to go right." He would not like to play so mean a part as that himself, and he more than once kept out of a scrape in order to satisfy himself that he was not choosing mischief from want of courage to say nay to his companions.

Does it seem unnatural that a boy of thirteen should have paused thus to think and weigh his actions? Not if he has in him enough of the Highland blood to ren-

der him at once dreamy and rash, thoughtful and impetuous; and if, as in Ronald's case, it is qualified by a sober, Lowland strain, the result is sure to be a character full of perplexing contradictions.

CHAPTER IV.

MISS FORBES.

VERY soon after Miss Forbes's arrival, the Bennetts were asked to the Hall to luncheon, instead of to dinner, in order that Ronald might be of the party; and Sir Duncan made a point of telling the governess how much he owed to Mrs Bennett for her care and instruction of his little girl.

He might have spared himself the trouble. Miss Trimmer had been taught her part, and while she listened with outward assent to his statement, her conclusions were other than he had intended. Yet she, like his sister, was perfectly polite to the Bennetts

when they came, speaking with that polished tone which may easily deceive a man, but which, to a woman's ear, resembles thin ice spread over deep waters, for she knows that it conceals something—if not actual ill-will, at least some mental reservation or some hidden scheme.

Mrs Bennett detected it at once, and so in part did her son, whose anxiety to appear at his ease made him nervous and awkward. Before luncheon was over, he had upset a flower-glass that stood before his plate; and Miss Forbes's voice, as she desired the servant to remove it, increased his confusion. Muriel, from the opposite side of the table, looked at him, half amused, half sympathising, and even her look wounded him. It seemed as though Sir Duncan only was thoroughly frank and pleasant.

The interminable luncheon over, Ronald went off with Muriel to the long picture-gallery, where hung portraits of ancestors,

soldiers, courtiers, judge and laird, rosy beauty and grey-haired grandmother.

"I like this one best," said Muriel, running up to a full-length of a gentleman in Highland dress; "he gave up everything, even his silver plate, to the Prince, and was beheaded after Culloden—

' Like a brave old Scottish cavalier,
All of the olden time.'

You know that song, don't you, Ronald?"

"Of course I do. And so you like soldiers best, Muriel?"

"Oh yes! they must be so brave and devoted, ready always to die for their country," said she, with childish enthusiasm.

"I'd like to be a soldier," said Ronald, in a whisper. He had never put his thought into words before.

"You! But you're to be a minister, Ronny; mamsie said so," exclaimed Muriel.

"Oh yes, I know. Don't say I spoke of anything else; I just wished it, you know."

“Just as I wish I were a fairy or a princess. I know what you mean, and it wouldn’t do to tell things like that; we should be laughed at,” replied Muriel, seriously.

Meanwhile Sir Duncan had taken the opportunity of saying a word to the minister.

“Ronald grows a fine, strong lad, doesn’t he?” he began,—and the father assented with evident pride.

“He would do well in some active life,—the army, for example.”

“The army! Do you think I would let a son of mine follow that godless profession? No, no; besides, Ronald came as a blessing to us, after our troubles, and I vowed him to the service of the Lord.”

“That may be hard upon him if he has tastes of another sort,” said Sir Duncan.

“A man can school his tastes, Sir Duncan; and besides, when a boy has had one object held steadily before him, he grows

up to it, as it were. Ronald is well on with his studies, and I think of sending him to the Academy at Dollar for a year or two."

"An excellent plan, I should say," replied Sir Duncan, who knew the impracticable nature of the man with whom he had to deal, and that it would be worse than useless to press the argument, however much he might pity the boy.

When the guests had taken their departure, and Sir Duncan had retired to his library, Miss Trimmer improved the occasion for Muriel's benefit.

"Mrs Bennett's accent is rather musical, is it not, although so very Scotch?"

"Yes, I always said she spoke rather prettily,—far better than her husband, who has the thorough Edinburgh accent. What do you think of the boy?" said Miss Forbes.

"He is a wonderfully good specimen for a country boy—one may say, a villager."

“Yes, not so bad as he might have been. Poor fellow, how wretchedly nervous he was!”

“Was he not? But then, what else can one expect?”

“Exactly. Muriel, get your work, child.”

Now Muriel had heard every word of this dialogue; at first with satisfaction, for they were praising her dear mamsie—afterwards with a mixture of surprise and vexation. Was Ronald really so very awkward? He certainly did get very red when he upset the flower-glass, and she couldn't think how he had done it; but still, Miss Trimmer needn't have spoken in that disagreeable way about it; and she fetched her work, and sat down to it with the least little indication of sulkiness, not unnoticed by the two ladies.

Forced to exert herself, lest she should discredit mamsie's teaching, she made rapid strides in her studies, and Miss 'Trimmer

was obliged to do justice to her predecessor's care. The more progress, however, the pupil made, the less time there was for visiting the manse ; and as Mrs Bennett had prophesied, the separation between her and her little pupil became almost complete. Ronald, too, was gone—sent, sorely against his mother's will, to Dollar ; and the manse was dull and lonely, and mamsie would sit idly gazing at the distant hills, and dream of the sound of the wind in the firs, and the whisper of the burns among the rushes by her old home. Once and again Sir Duncan came to ask if she thought that Muriel was doing well, and each time she gave him a satisfactory reply.

“I told ye the bairn must learn to fit her place, and she's learning quickly. Do you not see the bit air she has, and the way she speaks? She's had her fights and her tears now and then ; but she's a wiselike bairn, and when she sees she must

go a road, she'll go willingly enough," said mamsie, using homelier phrases, now that she was no longer teaching the "wee woman."

"Well, I suppose for once Alicia has been wise; she certainly seems to have been kind, which is the main point."

"Yes," said Mrs Bennett, wondering if the man beside her was incapable of suspecting that kindness had been part of Miss Forbes's plan. She herself, however, had not guessed at its extent. With a mother's prescience she had divined that Muriel's aunt wished to separate her from the companionship of a boy in Ronald's position, and she was just enough to admit that the wish was a wise one; but she did not know that Alicia Forbes was a disappointed woman. A brilliant marriage which she had planned for herself had been broken off in consequence of her own hasty pride. Attendance on an invalid father

had prevented her from rising as she aspired to do in the gay world, and by her injudicious behaviour to Lady Forbes she had cut herself off from the society in her brother's house.

This last failure had caused her to take her conduct into serious consideration; and she had so far profited by her repeated lessons, that she was prepared now to sacrifice her will to the attainment of her ends. Sir Duncan's estates were unentailed, and Muriel would be an heiress as well as a beautiful girl; and if her aunt were to train her well, bring her out, and enable her to make a good match, considerable credit would be hers, and not a little enjoyment could be taken by the way.

This, then, was the motive that brought her to the Hall, and enabled her to maintain a conciliatory demeanour towards both her brother and her niece. She met her reward; for Sir Duncan, who had antici-

pated a good deal of discomfort from her presence, was so agreeably disappointed that he felt a certain gratitude towards her, as though she had been the means of procuring him some unexpected good fortune. It was therefore natural that he should willingly accede to any request of hers, even though it might entail a departure from his accustomed mode of life: he owed her a debt, and he would discharge it generously.

It certainly startled him considerably when she proposed that the Hall should be shut up, and that they should go abroad for a year in order to give Muriel some further advantages. Still, he promised to think it over, and finally agreed to a compromise: he would take the party to Germany, and remain with them for three or four months; but at the end of that time he would probably return home, leaving them to complete their term of absence.

Muriel's delight was unbounded; and even the parting with Mrs Bennett was got over at the cost of many kisses and a few tears; for what young thing about to launch into a sea of new and wonderful pleasures, can spare more than a moment's thought to the older mariners, whose boats have been long since stranded on the shore?

Ronald was away at Dollar when the time came for saying farewell, but he was at the manse for the holidays when Sir Duncan returned alone from the Continent. He was greatly improved, both in look and manner, and in company with Sir Duncan showed to advantage; so that the latter would ask him up to the Hall, would lend him books, and sometimes take him with him in his walks about the place. "He cheers my solitude, for the Hall is empty without Muriel," he would say to Mrs Bennett; and she assented, and gladly saw

Ronald profiting by his new companion's good sense and experience.

Those were happy days for the lad; and none the less so that he heard a good deal of the travellers' news, for Sir Duncan would often take his letters down to the manse for Mrs Bennett to read. He had by this time completely abandoned Tom Paterson and his poaching associates, shaking them off with as cool a determination as he had shown strong self-will in joining them; and though he still loved to talk with Jamie, he seemed to have little in common with his old playmates.

"When you're home in summer, Ronald, Muriel will be at the Hall," said Mrs Bennett, not reckoning on the chances that control a young lady's movements.

Chance, indeed, is a much abused word, figuring, as it does, for all the passions that are the real springs of our actions. By *chance* it happened that at the time of the

Dollar summer vacation, Muriel was visiting friends in England ; and at the New Year, during the few days that she was at home she had a cold, which *chanced* to require an unusual amount of care. Miss Forbes was not one to leave matters to any chance that was not of her own arranging.

Ronald silently resented the ill-nature, as he considered it, which prevented him from seeing his child-friend ; for he did not believe in the cold from which she was suffering, and even Mrs Bennett thought that precautions were being carried needlessly far. Surely no harm could come of the bairns meeting each other once or twice. She was hurt ; and when an invitation arrived for her from the Hall two days after her boy had returned to Dollar, she declined it, without much attempt at excuse.

Forthwith, however, Sir Duncan appeared, to inquire if she were ailing, and

to reproach her for her absence ; and before his kindly tones her resentment melted away, and after a plea or two she withdrew the refusal that had vexed him. She knew that he was innocent of any share in his sister's schemes ; and for his sake and Muriel's, she tolerated Miss Forbes's politeness, which was so unlike the frank courtesy to which she had been accustomed, and even accepted calmly Miss Trimmer's patronising allusions to her early care of the child, now fast blossoming into girlhood.

The ladies made but a brief stay at the Hall, and greatly to Sir Duncan's dissatisfaction, began a series of visits which quite filled up the short time allowed as a Christmas vacation, leaving him in the solitude to which he had now grown accustomed. Once only he tried to expostulate : " Surely, Alicia, Muriel is too young to go visiting. I think she might stay at home during the holidays."

“Certainly, if you wish it, Duncan ; but it seems a pity she should have no companions. There are no children of her own age near at hand here except those dreadful Hardwickses, and I am sure she must be dull.”

“Dull ! Muriel dull ! My dear Alicia, you must find some better argument than that to convince me. I never saw the child dull in my life.”

Miss Forbes had made a mistake, and knew it : it was she who felt dull at Inver-allan, not her niece. Luckily for her, she could always drop an argument that did not suit her purpose, ignoring her own assertions as completely as if they had never been uttered ; and she did so on this occasion.

“Of course, as I said before, you must settle matters as you like. You know I always defer to your opinion. I arranged these visits, thinking it judicious that Muriel

should have an opportunity of seeing children who may be her friends by-and-by."

"Friends and partners—eh, Alicia?"

"And partners, certainly. I suppose you would not have me decline to enter a house where there happened to be boys of her own age; and you may be sure, Duncan, I am only taking her to the *very best* houses."

"I have not the slightest doubt of that, my dear."

"But the visits can be put off. Let me see: there's a child's fancy-ball at the Duke of Limeshire's—she will be sorry to miss that; and then there are the Gordons of Gordon—I must put them off. What had I best say?" murmured Miss Alicia, as if to herself, while she continued her knitting.

Sir Duncan laughed. "Do not distress yourself, Alicia. Of course, if the child is counting on her visits, it would be cruel to disappoint her—and I would not for the

world oblige you to give up going to the Duke's or any other of the 'very best' houses; only, I must say this, I think you should have told me before your plans were completed."

"Well, really, Duncan, you care so little for these things—you never attend when we get invitations," began Miss Alicia, looking rather confused.

"I confess my sins on that head. I cannot remember the contents of the piles of notes you get through, but I do care about the disposal of Muriel's time. Do not vex yourself now; you shall have your way, but let me have mine a little when she is next at home."

Miss Forbes felt that she had been fortunate in this conversation, even while she wondered at her brother's blindness. Perhaps he was less blind than she thought; and he had indeed felt no small annoyance when he discovered that his daughter was

to be carried off, as a reason for her aunt's own enjoyment. No doubt Miss Forbes honestly meant to do well by the girl, as well as by herself. Sir Duncan recognised her good intentions in her choice of places to be visited ; and after all, she thought herself a woman of the world, and with such a one it was impossible for a man with Sir Duncan's tastes to argue.

“What is light to me is darkness to her, and *vice versâ*,” thought he—adding with a smile, “I can trust my Muriel : she will see through the clouds of her aunt's wisdom by the time she is a woman, or her mother's nature and the early training she had will count for nothing.”

CHAPTER V.

“STURM UND DRANG.”

EMBOLDENED by her successes, Miss Forbes took a further step shortly after the holidays, and, seconded by Miss Trimmer, reported that Muriel had profited so much by her classes, and was so much improved even by her short residence abroad, that it was a thousand pities that she should be hurried away. It would be far better to leave her there for another year, or even more, than to remove her, as had been originally proposed, to a school in London.

Sir Duncan sighed, but consented to his sister's new scheme,—travelling over himself to Germany to ascertain whether his

daughter really wished to remain abroad for another year or two. The girl, in the midst of the keen delight that a young mind feels when each day brings some fresh knowledge within its grasp, assured her father that she would bitterly regret the interruption of her studies; and Sir Duncan returned home alone, and told Mrs Bennett with a quiet smile that he would soon hardly know his own bairn, she was growing so tall, and was so well finished in every way. To this Mrs Bennett replied that it was to be expected, and that she wished she could feel the same as regarded her boy, who remained unfinished in every respect. “Just a big schoolboy,” she added, with a touch of bitterness in her tone.

In sooth, she had some reason to complain of Ronald in his present state; and her natural impatience, as well as her motherly desire for excellence in her son, led her to overlook the probability that some, at

least, of his faults would cure themselves in time, and might be considered in the same light as chickenpox or any other harmless youthful ailment.

Passing from Dollar to the college in Edinburgh, the contradictions in his nature became more marked than ever. In the town, he prided himself on the roughness of his clothes, and affected uncouth modes of speech. He was the ringleader when the Greek class broke into hideous din, or the gallery at the Reid concert was filled with trampling boys. No one joined more readily in any loud jest; and when a Lord Rector was to be elected, he was the most hot-headed of Radical canvassers. At the debating club, too, his voice was loudest in declaiming against social distinctions, which the boy-speakers treated as if they were among the great realities of life.

Yet Ronald had friends in the college of another stamp, who knew a different side

of his character—knew that among the quiet recesses of the Braid Hills, where they hunted for ferns or flowers, he would talk of books, of poetry, of hopes and dreams, in tones unlike those in which he uttered the noisy declamations of the club.

It was on a soft spring day, after one of these meetings, that he and a friend named Porteous, a quiet and somewhat dandified lad, had agreed to go botanising together. They were to meet at the end of the Bridges and proceed along Princes Street.

Porteous, in a neat tweed suit, with a correct tin botanical case across his shoulder, arrived first, and presently, to his dismay, saw Ronald swinging along towards him, clad in a rough and ill-made suit of very light brown, and carrying in his hand a battered milk-tin, with an impromptu handle of string.

“You are never going along Princes

Street at three in the afternoon in that rig, Ronald!" exclaimed Porteous.

"Certainly I am: what ails you at it? Come along."

"Not for the world. Here, jump into a cab; it won't cost much," said the other, hailing one as he spoke.

"It mayn't cost much, but you may pay it. I wouldn't go in a cab for the world," replied Ronald, gravely; and hailing an omnibus in his turn, he was on the roof in a moment, the objectionable milk-tin carefully displayed upon his knee.

When both got down at the end of Princes Street, Porteous could not but laugh at his own discomfiture; nor did he allude to the subject again till they had had a breather up the hills, and had sat down to discuss their bread and cheese on a grey boulder overlooking a wooded hollow, where the first green was beginning to powder the brown sprays.

“In confidence now, Ronald, where on earth did you get that tin?” began Porteous.

“I bought it from a bairn in the High Street gutter for the sum of a bawbee.”

“And what induced you to commit such an extravagance?”

“A desire to ruffle your aristocratic prejudices, I believe. It’s an ill-conditioned article, I admit,” replied Ronald, gazing pensively at its deep-dinted sides.

“I thought so ; and I suppose it was for the same reason that you were so ferocious at the club last night?”

“Partly. I saw you were there, and I thought it would be good for you to listen to the voice of reason.”

“The voice of nonsense, you mean. Come, Ronald, look me in the face, here on this hillside, and repeat in earnest all you said last night.”

Ronald turned, and surveying the speaker

with the same air of mock gravity, gave a long whistle.

“Couldn’t do it, my boy ; the fire isn’t kindled at present.”

“The flame’s gone into smoke, in fact. Well, if I were you, I wouldn’t talk a lot of balderdash to a parcel of lads at night, that I’d be ashamed to repeat to a friend in cool blood next day.”

“I daresay you’re right, Porteous ; but you’re such a quiet fellow, you don’t know the temptation. It must be the Macgregor blood in me, I suppose, that gets up sometimes, till I feel as if a devil had got possession of me. And I’ll tell you what, there’s a woman, a *lady*,” added Ronald, with bitter emphasis, “who could rouse me at this moment if she walked across the brae there, with her silks and jewels, and fine air of being above me.”

“Do you mean you grudge her her silks and jewels ?”

“Do I mean I’m an idiot? It’s the air, the manner, the—I don’t know what; I only know the sight of her makes me mad.”

“Miss Forbes, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I confess you’re a puzzle to me, Ronald. There’s a fat old woman who kept some lodgings I once had, and she must have been of the same kind of nature as your aversion. She wore a silk gown on Sabbath, and a Paisley shawl with a huge pebble brooch; and I assure you it was a sight to see the way she gathered her rustling skirts and avoided the poorer folk she passed. She often amused me, but I can’t say she annoyed me.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It seems to me it is the same thing,—human nature coming out in just the same way in a different class. Excuse me, Ronald, you’ve told me the truth, and nothing but the truth, but you’ve never told me the

whole truth. There must be more behind, or a fellow like you wouldn't be so provoked by the whims of a foolish woman."

Ronald gave an inarticulate reply, and after a moment's silence, proposed that they should walk on; nor was the subject renewed between them. Porteous was right. He had heard more than once of Miss Forbes and her supposed delinquencies, but Ronald had never breathed the name of Muriel, for even to himself he had hardly confessed how deeply he had resented the aunt's interruption of his boyish friendship for her niece. Moreover, in his hot youth he could hardly perceive that the antagonism between him and Miss Forbes sprang, in part, from a likeness of character.

Miss Forbes thought highly of birth and rank: she had the Scotch love of genealogy and pedigree, and for a Scotchwoman, an unusual love of display. Hence the silk attire, and the perpetual tinkle of bracelets

and shine of gems, that no one disliked more than her quiet brother Sir Duncan. Her manner was never so imperious as in speaking to Ronald himself, because she felt that he grudged her the deference she deemed her due; and the lad rebelled at her tone all the more because he knew that he too loved a pedigree; and though he was not ill content with his mother's name, he disliked his patronymic, and hated the position in which it seemed to him almost unjust that he should have been born. He knew in his secret heart that had he been of higher rank he would have heeded the lady's fancies no more than he heeded the freaks of a fellow-collegian; and it had not occurred to him that a manlier self-respect would have given him the self-assurance he needed, while a more courteous manner would have disarmed her dislike.

By-and-by, however, in his second year at the college, he observed that he was less

noticed than he had been at first by the professors, some of whom were his father's friends ; and more than one lady, at whose house he had once or twice been entertained, treated him with marked coldness.

“What's the meaning of it, Porteous?” said he one day to his friend, who had just received a gracious bow and smile, while only a chill recognition had been vouchsafed to himself.

“It's another form of *Forbesism*, I fancy,” replied Porteous, smiling.

“What in the world do you mean?”

“My dear fellow, if you will behave like a young savage, you can't expect that people will wish you to exhibit in their drawing-rooms. It's all very well to declaim against social usages in the debating club, but Mrs Professor Smith likes them attended to in her house. Why on earth do you want your father's friends to think you an ill-mannered clown?”

“Holloa ! gently, I say.”

“That’s what Smith himself called you ; and why you do it, I don’t know. It vexes me awfully to hear you abused, because I know you’re not such a bad fellow as you make yourself out to be.”

“What a devil of a fuss people make about trifles !”

“It’s you that make a fuss, by refusing to yield to the majority. If these things are trifles, why contend about them ?”

“You admit they are trifles ?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t consider anything a trifle that makes the wheels of life run easier. If I find a fellow’s always rude and rough, I avoid him, as I would any other nuisance. And it seems to me that a man who is afraid of showing courtesy to others, is wanting in self-respect.”

“Well, you’ve given me a pretty rating. I wonder why I stand it from you !”

“Because you half agree with me, my

lad,—that's the reason," replied Porteous ; and Ronald did not dissent.

He was, in fact, growing weary of the noisy set to which he had attached himself. Things had been said and done that annoyed him ; for though in a fit of morose passion he might plunge into boisterous excess, the real refinement of his nature invariably reasserted itself in time. At college, he was repeating on a larger scale the Paterson episode of his childhood.

Other motives, too, withdrew him from his rough companions ; for he was beginning to think, or at least was endeavouring to think, more seriously of the profession for which he was destined. He had hitherto pursued his studies with a keen relish for their own sake, and had regarded them as rungs in the ladder leading to that pleasant but indefinite career of which he still thought with vague ambition.

Now, however, the clerical net was clos-

ing in upon him ; and as he plunged into more technical branches of learning, he realised more and more fully his aversion to his future occupation. At the same time, he did not know to what other work he could turn his hand, and was thoroughly convinced that his father would not only refuse to help him, but would hardly pardon him, if he were to breathe a syllable of his feeling.

Again and again he debated with himself whether he should surrender blindly or make a struggle for freedom, and again and again the debate left him as undecided as ever. Sometimes there came to him glimpses of what he might be and do if his heart were in his work.

On one winter night he strolled down the High Street, observing idly the groups crowded below the flaring gas. Here, at the door of a public-house, hideous laughter rose from a knot of idlers as a despairing

wife, with vehement words and gestures, tried to drag her half-drunken husband away. Lower down, haggard, poorly clad women drove hard bargains at a butcher's open shop-front, for it was Saturday night. Beyond these, the whole street was lit with a red glare ; for between flaring torches, a clown with merry antics was begging the crowd to walk up and see the wonderful sights within his brightly painted van. On the other side of the van, where the shadows were darkest, crouched a solitary figure—a woman, scantily clad, her white face turned blankly to the mist above her, unheeding the laugh and stir, deaf to the clown's jest, blind to his streaming torchlight, for on her knee lay the thin body of a child newly dead.

Ronald stopped, horror-struck, full of pity that he knew not how to express, and with a vague idea of help, looked up and down the street, to see if there were a cab at hand. There was none ; but as he glanced

down the hill where the street was quieter and the blue mist hung softly, he saw a dark figure coming quickly towards him. It was a young man he knew by sight and name, a true minister, whose warm and living faith was

“Above all chances and all churches.”

As he advanced his eye fell on the miserable woman, and in a moment he was at her side. Ronald could see the motionless head gradually droop, the listless hands suddenly raised to the face, and he guessed that the merciful tears had come.

The minister took from his own shoulders a plaid, in which he tenderly wrapped the tiny child, and lifting it in his arms and telling the mother to lean on him, he passed on his way. Ronald followed for a little distance, and saw that he paused twice: once to speak to the wife whose husband had left her, and who was now rating the

crowd; and at the sound of his voice she grew still, and slipped away home. Again he stopped, and this time the sobbing woman beside him bent, at his suggestion, to comfort and direct a toddling bairn that had lost its way. After that, he and his companion moved on into the narrowing darkness of the street, and Ronald saw them no more.

But his heart was touched for the moment, and he asked himself what better life he could wish than to scatter help and comfort about his path, as this brave Christian was doing. Boy as he was, he did not consider whether he would ever reach the same serene heights of faith, but assumed that he could, if he would, do work such as he had seen that night. Satisfied as he was upon that point, it did nevertheless occur to him that but comparatively few ministers are in the stir of city life, and that for him in particular another lot was intended.

James Bennett had succeeded his father at Tillybodle, and he trusted that in time Ronald would as surely succeed him, for these were the days of patronage; and the lad's very soul sickened within him as he thought of that monotonous country life, with Muriel Forbes at once so near him and so very far away. Nevertheless, for the present at least, he must struggle on, trusting to those all-potent possibilities with which an ardent mind fills up the blanks of the future.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST SIGHT OF HER.

TIME passed till it was now full four years since Ronald and Muriel had met, and he wondered what she would be like, picturing to himself a somewhat pensive face with serious eyes, such as he had been used to watch when she said her lesson at his mother's knee.

Winter sports were in full swing when he went home to the manse for a brief vacation. The country had long been frost-bound, — snow powdered the Ochills, and clothed the Grampians from head to foot ; trees and rocks stood out blackly from the universal misty grey, and the still air rang

with the merry shouts of curlers and the far-heard hum of their stones. Skating, too, had begun to be the fashion, and the players of the roaring game were no longer allowed to monopolise all the good ice in the country. Airthrey Loch, in particular, was a favourite resort: winding as it did for a considerable distance between grassy banks, it was especially suited for skaters, and was beautiful besides.

Thither Ronald was repairing the morning after his arrival, skates in hand, and as he tramped along he whistled cheerily. The keen air inspired him, the sun shone brilliantly on the frosty earth, and his mother had told him that a party from the Hall went almost daily to the loch.

When he had gone about half-way, the Inverallan waggonette passed him, full of ladies and gentlemen muffled up in furs. One of the former turned her head, and catching sight of him, nodded in a friendly

way. He could not see her face, but his heart beat as he hastened on, impatient at his own slow progress, though he was doing near five miles an hour.

How graceful she looked ! he could see that, though a veil hid her features : how pretty that black hat was ! and there was something crimson round her throat : the furs, too, looked so rich and warm,—the whole effect was so pleasantly luxurious ! How would she behave to him at the loch ; and who were those men in the carriage ? Dandy Londoners, no doubt, thought Ronald, jealously.

Not that he had as yet said to himself distinctly that he admired or cared for Muriel Forbes ; his thought was only of liking, of old times, of home associations ; yet that thought was but coyly awaiting the touch, the glance, the moment's impulse, that should transfigure it, turning liking to love.

Arriving at the water-side, he fastened on his skates, and darted hither and thither in search of the party from the Hall. The ice was crowded, and people naturally divided themselves into groups, according to their capabilities and tastes.

At one end curling was in full swing, and round the rinks stood numerous spectators. Here a troop of boys were sliding, while near them inexperienced skaters made their first essays, each hoping that his or her clumsiness might be unnoticed in the crowd. It was a vain hope ; for if now and again a luckless tyro met with a fall, he was pretty sure to hear a mocking cry of "Soop him up ! soop him up !" or "Crack an egg upon him !" from the laddies on the slide.

Here and there, keeping near the edge, was some solitary performer who shrank from the general fun ; and beyond these again, where the loch curves suddenly, was a broad expanse of ice, on which the more

skilful were enjoying and exhibiting their powers. Among these, Ronald soon espied the ladies from the Hall; and he shot away down the side so as to turn and face them on his way back: he would not speak, he thought, till he saw what greeting Muriel would bestow.

He was not long kept in doubt, for she no sooner saw him than she moved towards him sufficiently to oblige him to come up to her.

“I am so glad to see you, Ronald,” she said, cordially. “Isn’t this a lovely day? and the ice is perfect. Come and let me introduce you to my friends, and we’ll go down the loch to the far end.”

For an instant Ronald was almost too much bewildered to reply. Was it possible that the little child he remembered could be this dazzling girl?

Her eyes were sparkling, her colour heightened, the expression of her face was bewitching, with its happy blending of in-

nocence and fun. She looked the picture of health and joy; and Ronald turned, with a new, sudden sense of delight, and followed her to the spot where three or four ladies and gentlemen were gliding slowly about, evidently waiting for their hostess.

From the opposite side, another gentleman just then joined the group, and was received by Muriel with less cordiality than she had evinced to her old friend. The new-comer was short and stout, with a heavy face and small eyes; and not being thoroughly at home on his skates, he bowed awkwardly as Muriel began a general introduction.

“Mary, this is my old friend Mr Bennett. Miss Gordon, Mr Hardwicke, Miss Leslie, Mr Bennett. There! it is very difficult to introduce you all when none of you stand still for two seconds. Now let us go right down the loch;” and away she sped, followed by the rest of the party.

To Ronald's surprise, Miss Leslie began to talk to him with apparent interest, and an evident desire to monopolise his society. She was by turns amusing and sarcastic, and launched into the gossip of a world unknown to Ronald, and quite unlike that of Edinburgh drawing-rooms.

A puzzled look crossed her face when he more than once confessed that he was unacquainted with the people she mentioned ; and at last, annoyed at his own ignorance, wearied of her talk, and impatient at his detention from Muriel's side, he uttered some vague excuse and glided away.

But he was not to exchange many words with Muriel, for one of the gentlemen, whose name he had not caught, kept persistently near her, and there ensued a mute rivalry on Ronald's part, in which he was speedily forced to confess himself beaten. He skated fairly well, and had had some dim notion that he could outdo the dandies,

as he scornfully termed the other young men ; and certainly the heavy-faced youth was soon distanced, and left to his fate, in the shape of Miss Leslie.

Muriel's companion was of a different type. His general appearance was precisely of the kind to irritate a lad like Ronald, conscious of his own deficiencies, and jealous of the very ease with which the other man enjoyed the position he himself coveted ; but he was no mere idler, at least as far as physical activity was concerned, and Ronald soon felt that while he was exerting himself to his utmost, this rival, with his perfect skates, was moving as easily as though he were walking across a room. The girl, now skating between them, now holding back while they enjoyed the luxury of outside edge or tried some more difficult figure, may have understood something of Ronald's thoughts ; perhaps she wished to give him a lesson, or

perhaps it was out of mere fun that she turned to her companion and begged him to show her some of the figures he had learned in Canada.

Without demur the young man complied, and Ronald's honesty forced him to applaud the skilled grace of the performance, after which Muriel spoke to him with all her former kindness.

Together they reached the bank when the short afternoon was beginning to close in, and the first thrill of envy darted through Ronald as he lingered foolishly and watched Captain Leslie—this was the skater's name—removing the skates from Muriel's dainty feet.

She, meanwhile, was momentarily perplexed: it seemed ungracious to bid Ronald good-bye, and leave him to follow on foot, when she must drive past his very door; but the only vacant place in the carriage was on the box, the gentleman

who had filled it not intending to return. Could she, should she, offer it to Ronald? He looked as if he were more touchy than ever: would he think that she was slighting him if she placed him in the servants' seat?

Something of her doubt was in her tone as she spoke. "Couldn't we take you home, Ronald? Let me see; Mr Humphreys is not coming back—he was on the box."

"I will take the box-seat, Miss Forbes, if you will allow me, and Mr Bennett can have my place; I shall be glad of a smoke," said Captain Leslie, with ready tact, as he wound the straps round the skates.

Ronald wondered why Muriel thanked him with so bright a glance, and did not fail to observe the look of pleasure with which Leslie turned away; but he took his seat happily enough in the waggonette, and talked of he knew not what and he knew not how, his whole soul so

absorbed in watching the beautiful face opposite to him, that the conversation made no more impression on him than if it had been the talk of a dream. She gave him her hand as she said good-night, and he hardly dared to touch it, but got down, and stood at the little garden-gate till the flash from the carriage-lamps and the white steam of the horses' breath had vanished at a turn of the road.

Then he went in, with a strange dazzled look in his eyes, and replied vaguely to his mother's questions, till she gazed at him over her spectacles and asked him sharply what ailed him, that he should talk like a man in his sleep?

At that he shook himself, as though in reality but newly awakened, and met his mother's eyes kindly, and told her that he had had a pleasant day.

Muriel's impressions of the afternoon were given in the few precious minutes'

talk which she invariably had with her father before dinner.

“Well, my pet, have you enjoyed yourself?” said he.

“Yes, papa; and Ronald was there, and I brought him home in the carriage. Aunt Alicia was angry; but he had been with us, and I could not say good-bye to him and leave him to walk when we were going the same way.”

“No, of course not; what do you think of him?”

“Oh, he’s just his old self, papa. It was such fun! I had to introduce them all when they were moving about round me, and Mary Leslie made such a mistake,—she took Ronald for—you would never guess—Mr Hardwicke!”

“And was she very cordial to him, then?”

“Yes, I could not make it out, till I heard her talking to him about people in London, and then I saw what she had done.”

“And did you enlighten her?”

“No, papa,” replied Muriel, demurely; “I could not resist leaving her to find out. It was so funny to see her talking to Ronald, and fancying he was the rich Mr Hardwicke; she never would have tolerated such a coat as he wears except for that idea. Poor dear Ronald, I wish he looked nicer; don’t you, papa?”

“He looks very nice among his own people, my dear,” said Sir Duncan; but his daughter laughed, and kissed him.

“Oh, papa, that was said just like aunt Alicia; but I like your own way of speaking ever so much better, you know;” and so saying, the girl left the room.

It will be seen from the above conversation that if Ronald was still a subject of consideration to the elders at the Hall, Muriel herself was perfectly frank and at her ease concerning him; and as her father reflected, she would not have audibly criti-

cised his appearance had she cared at all how he looked.

Miss Forbes's schemes had, in fact, turned out exactly as she wished, and had not done the harm that might have been expected.

Muriel was so accustomed to refined society, to courteous manners and well-bred speech, that these things had become as much a part of her daily life as the food she ate and the clothes she wore. The man who should win her love must never offend in one dainty particular against the habitual good taste of her life and its surroundings. This being so, it was simply impossible that Ronald's name should ever be breathed in that delicate inner chamber of her fancy where some day love might inhabit.

There was no touch of pride in this unconscious setting apart of her old playmate; she was merely obeying her fine instinct, which had been trained to greater sensitive-

ness. In her friendships she was as frank and sincere as she was shy and reserved at any mention of a warmer feeling; and neither her aunt's shrewd wisdom, nor the influences carefully brought to bear upon her, had caused her to forget her dear mamsie's early teaching, or rendered her insensible to the beauty of her father's quiet, unworldly life. Perhaps, on the contrary, they had had an opposite effect; for she was not without native shrewdness, and could see through her aunt's shallow maxims as well as she could appreciate her kindness, which, born of good policy, had now grown into a real affection for her niece.

Whether she would quickly discover that her friendship could only be to Ronald a deadly snare, or whether she would go on unwittingly poisoning his life, would depend on the speed with which her own heart might be roused to understand itself, and

others through itself. As yet she was merely a blithe and frank girl.

Two days after the skating, Ronald, from his father's study, heard the front door open and a clear young voice calling "Mamsie!"

"Here, my pet," answered his mother quickly, and a light step passed into the sitting-room and the door closed. He sat on, motionless, with strained ears and a throbbing heart, doubting whether to go in or stay away. If he were to go in, into that room where she was sitting,—was she on the low stool, as of old, at mamsie's feet?—what should he do, where should he place himself, how comport himself before her? What had become of the secret pride with which he had told himself in his noisiest moods that he could play the gentleman as easily as the "rough"? At this moment he felt himself a clown, a shy awkward fool. A ripple of laughter touched his ear, and the faint silvery sound

brought a hot flush to his face. Hark ! the door opened ; had he waited too long and lost his chance ? was she actually going ? No : it was his mother's quiet footfall in the passage ; she was coming to him, and he leant his head on his hands over the open book before him.

“ Ronald, Muriel's here ; come and see her.”

“ Is she ? did she ask for me, mother ? ” he answered, as indifferently as he could.

“ Ask for you ! Are you to be asked for before you come and see her, laddie ? She did ask whether you were at home.”

“ Very well ; I'll be there in a minute, mother,” and as Mrs Bennett, with a muttered “ Well, to be sure ! ” went away, Ronald sprang up, and darting into his father's dressing-room by another door, looked at his hair and his tie, wished that his clothes, his face, his hands, were all other than they were, and hurried back into the parlour.

Muriel rose from her seat—it was the old faded stool—as he entered, and again her cordial greeting thrilled and flattered him. For some minutes they chatted of the ice, of the party, of Miss Leslie, whose name brought a furtive smile to Muriel's lips; then the talk flagged unaccountably, and she rose to leave somewhat abruptly.

“And when will you come back, dearie?” said Mrs Bennett, fondly; “I grow young again whenever I see your face.”

“Indeed I'll come when I can, mamsie dear; but you've no notion what a lot I have to do. What between Mrs Simpson, who wants me to learn housekeeping, and aunt Alicia, and father's dear old study tempting one into it, and my own reading, and visitors, and fifty other things, I am always busy.”

“Pleasant business, my dear, isn't it?”

“Very pleasant, mamsie. Sometimes I think my life is just too pleasant; but then,

again, I think it is good for one to enjoy happiness when it comes, is it not ?”

“Of course it is ; and your happiness runs over into other lives, my dear, like the waters of a bright wee burn,—into my quiet life, for example.”

“Ah ! that is very pleasant to hear. I should like it to be so always,” said the girl, gravely. “Good-bye, Ronald. Mamsie says you are working hard : I hope you will succeed,” she added, but the lad did not echo her wish. He only said good-bye as he shook hands, and accompanied her in silence to the garden-gate. She glanced at him curiously as she passed out, and repeated her good-bye with a shade less warmth of tone.

“Are ye always as grim when ye talk to a young girl, Ronald ? They must think you but poor company,” said Mrs Bennett, as he re-entered the house.

“I have little experience of any company,

as you know, mother ; but was I, am I, very grim ? ”

“ You were just as if you’d seen a ghost. The lassie was chattering to me like a bairn again, till you came in.”

“ I am very sorry I spoilt your talk, then, mother, but you fetched me yourself,—I’m off to the study again, now.” He could not say to his books, for he knew that he would not read another syllable that day.

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER THE SPELL.

RONALD was always given to long rambles, but now he began to parcel out his time day after day in the same fashion. During the whole morning he would stay at home, or at least within sight of the house, for he had found out that Muriel's visits had always been paid before her luncheon-time. In the afternoon he went out, and would return at various hours. Sometimes he came home soon, and with a glad face, for he had seen or perhaps spoken to her; on other days, in spite of cold or wet, he would remain out till long after dark, nursing his disappointment and his dreams.

Thaw had set in, and there was no more skating; the air was full of moisture that gathered on the boughs, and hung there till the slowly formed drops dripped softly to the ground. There was a chill smell in the woods, the fog-wreaths lay along the hill-side, and the sun sank daily behind masses of fiery-edged cloud. Their upper misty spears were just gathering colour on an afternoon when Ronald, with a sigh, stepped out from the tree-trunk against which he had long been leaning, near the little waterfall. As he came forward into the light, Muriel, on her way home from the village, reached the bridge, and recognising him, paused.

He sprang to her side. "It is growing late," he said; "let me come with you to the lodge."

"It is far later than I thought," she answered. "I was talking to Nannie Burton, and I did not notice how the light was

fading. What an age it seems since you and I used to play down there by the fall !”

“It is an age. Do you remember the day you fell in ?”

“I should think so ; and how cleverly you pulled me out again, and how angry Mrs Simpson was,” said Muriel, with her silver laugh.

“She said I was not fit company for you, I remember, which is just my own feeling now.”

“How foolish of you !” said the girl, half surprised, half sorry that he should express the feeling, even if he were conscious of it.

“I cannot help it, though,” he answered, “everything is so changed : it seemed incredible that you should still come and sit at my mother’s feet, as you used to do when you were a little child !”

“You mean that you expected me to forget my old friends. Was it kind or gen-

erous of you, Ronald, to take that for granted?"

"No, it was neither, but it was human."

"Was it? I think if I were ever to forget what your mother was to me, I should be a base woman; and if it were only that you are her son, I could not feel otherwise than kindly to you."

"I am grateful for kindness, even if it is only given to my mother's son, and not to me," replied Ronald, with a touch of humour.

Muriel laughed. "That is just your old demure way of speaking; you are not changed a bit! But now tell me, for I want to know, how do you get on with your studies?"

"Well; so my superiors say. Old Professor Kirke always takes snuff when he has anything to do with me, and that is a favourable symptom."

"Of his state, or of yours?"

“Both—his serenity being the effect of my labours, or any one else’s whose work pleases him.”

“Well, that is satisfactory; I am very glad of it,” said the girl, kindly.

“Are you? You would like to see me settled as a country minister. I beg your pardon—it does not matter to you. I mean, you think it would be a good thing for me?”

“Do you not think so yourself? It is a grand profession; and besides, your father and mother long for it so.”

“Ah! that is another matter. But you admire the profession, then?”

“I do. Churchmen, of any denomination, have such a power of doing good, of helping others, of combating doubt and evil,” replied Muriel earnestly, anxious to fulfil a promise given to Mrs Bennett, that if she had an opportunity she would urge Ronald to keener exertions, and endeavour

to arouse in him a greater interest in his future lot.

“Strange,” said he; “I thought you would have admired a soldier’s trade.”

There was a second’s pause before Muriel answered, but in the dusk he could not see whether her face betrayed any emotion.

“I admire soldiers too, but one’s sympathies are not all given to one profession. Each has its own nobleness—that is, for a noble man.”

“Are you as great a hero-worshipper as ever?”

“Quite; though I have altered my idea of a hero a little.”

“And your idea is——?”

“Ah! I can’t put it all into words, without thinking of them carefully; but the hero I admire would find room for noble action in any work or any rank. I would sing of him that

‘The man’s the gowd for a’ that.’”

“And so singing, you would teach a man to be noble,” said Ronald, in a very low voice. “I must call on Sir Duncan some day, before I go,” he added; “it is a long time since I saw him.”

“Yes; he has had a bad cold, and been out very little of late. Come in now, it is just afternoon tea-time.”

“Oh no, not to-day,” said Ronald, with a sudden rush of shyness. He could not go into the drawing-room at Muriel’s side; he would betray himself. Out here in the dusky afternoon he need not fear lest she should see the longing in his eyes.

“To-morrow then, if you like. We are always in at this hour. Next day the house will be filled for the county ball.”

“Indeed! You are going to it?”

“Yes. It is my first ball here, and I am looking forward to it immensely.”

“You are sure to enjoy it. Here we are

at the lodge. This has been a very pleasant walk. Good night, Miss Forbes."

"Good night. I will tell papa that you are coming to tea to-morrow."

The iron gates opened and closed, and Ronald turned away to retrace every step of the road he had trod with her. How sweet she was, how fair, and how high-hearted! She would be a woman to spur a man on in the work he undertook, to keep his aims pure and his hands clean. No one would dare to show her an ignoble thought. And what a wonderful delicate reserve there was about her in the midst of all her frankness! He had longed to call her by her sweet old name—had thought that he would dare so much in leaving her; but as she bade him good-bye the familiar word would not come, and he had addressed her for the first time as Miss Forbes. He was not sure that she had heard him; her own tone had not varied

by a shade in replying. "And she thought the ministry a grand profession ; well, perhaps she was right."

His mother looked anxiously at him as he came into the parlour, and asked if he had met Muriel.

"I did ; it was later than she thought, and I saw her to the lodge," he replied, and took up a book.

Mrs Bennett went on knitting her grey hose ; but glancing at him now and again, she noted that he never turned a page, and her vague uneasiness began to take shape.

"Is it to keep me from talking to you that you're holding a book in your hand, Ronald ?" she asked.

"Oh, mother, how you do watch me!" he replied, a little impatiently, flinging the volume on the table : "there's my father coming to tea,—don't say anything more now."

Unfortunately, the habit of arranging their conversation to suit Mr Bennett was growing upon both mother and son. Years ripen a man's nature into greater sweetness and perfection ; or else, with shrinking vitality, his character also shrivels and bears a dry and acid fruit.

As he grew older, James Bennett became more rigid in his views, and less tolerant in his mode of expressing them. He would not move with the tide ; and the tide, with its surging billows of thought and action, and its foam and froth of speech, swept on and left him behind, a discontented man ; and therefore it happened that in his presence Mrs Bennett and Ronald chose their topics carefully, and even then often provoked discussions that were of no avail.

This evening Ronald mentioned by chance that he intended calling next day at the Hall.

“ I've a great mind to go with you ; I'd

like a word or two with Sir Duncan," said Bennett, grimly.

"What about, James?" asked his wife.

"I'd like to know if he intends that stiff-necked sister of his, and his daughter, to go regularly to the English church in Stirling, abandoning the Kirk of their fathers, and taking out horses and men for their pleasure."

"Oh, that's where she goes, is it?" said Ronald, absently.

"What is it to you where she goes?"

"It's her mother's Church," said Mrs Bennett, interposing, "and there never was a better Christian than she was."

"You are not qualified to speak on that question, wife; and whatever her mother may have been, Muriel Forbes is allowed to do unadvisable things. With her foreign ways, music on Sabbath evening, and ball-going, and play-acting in the house, such as there's to be next week, it is

clear to me Sir Duncan is neglecting his duty."

"And do you propose telling him so?" asked his son.

"That will be for me to determine. I am of opinion he has neglected it in allowing his daughter to remain so long abroad under her aunt's care. She's a light-headed lassie, I doubt."

"She's nothing of the sort," exclaimed Ronald, hotly; "and I have seen her, and talked to her, which I believe you have not done, though you judge her."

Bennett put down his teacup and looked at his son with a cool, observant gaze, which had always tried Ronald's impatient temper sorely.

"The sooner you return to college, young man, the better. Muriel Forbes is not for you, that you need defend her against me with such heat."

"I know Muriel a deal better than either

of you," said Mrs Bennett, "and I could tell you both that she has a more wholesome nature than either of ye dream of."

"You speak like a woman, wife. I doubt not the girl has a wholesome nature, as you call it, but you have learned little from me in all these years if you consider that sufficient. But you are against me in these matters,—a man's foes are they of his own household," said Bennett, with a dignified sadness that always touched his wife's heart and made her grieve over their differences.

His harsh creed was so ingrained into the man, that he groaned over what he thought was a falling away that needed severity; and now, as he rose and went silently to his study, she knew that he was full of inward bitterness at the dull state of her spiritual sense. She upheld him, however, to her son, and by this loyalty lost much of the love that she

longed for passionately. The boy felt that she sided against him, and did not see the struggle in her mind.

“Your father is right, Ronald; it will not be for your peace that you should see much of that bonny girl.”

“Have you and he made up your minds that I cannot see her without falling in love with her?”

“I am not just blind yet, laddie, and I know both her and you. You’re not in the same mind you were when you came from Edinburgh. You didn’t stay out then, when the fog’s as thick on the hill as the smoke of the Inverallan furnaces; and you didn’t *look* at your book then, Ronald—you *read* it. I wish you had a call, and were settled in life. If you were married to some wiselike woman and had your work to do, you’d be quieter, and happier too, laddie.”

“I’m afraid your wiselike woman

wouldn't suit me, mother ; and as to being settled—I wish I were gold-hunting, cattle-herding in Texas, keeping sheep in Australia,—anything that would take me away, and give me my freedom ! ”

As he uttered for the first time the need that was in him, Ronald rose and drew himself up, flinging back his head with a gesture that, in his childish days, his mother had known well, for it betokened a wild fit.

“ There's a bondage worse than loving a girl that's out of one's reach, mother ; and sometimes I wonder why I don't decide like a man and break my chains.”

Mrs Bennett did not utter a word, and the youth, after waiting for a moment, as if in hope of a reply, left the room ; but when he was gone, she covered her pale face and sobbed tearlessly. She, too, was in bondage, to two proud natures who gave her far less love than they received, but

whose affection and presence were to her as her very life-blood.

She made no allusion to the conversation next day, nor did the minister propose to accompany his son when, at about four o'clock, he set off for Inverallan Hall. He was shown into a small drawing-room, where, when the ladies were alone, they usually sat. Miss Alicia—she made a point of giving her niece her full honours, always speaking of her as Miss Forbes—received him graciously, her fears regarding him being completely at rest. She even called upon Muriel to give him some tea, though she was already at the little table where the tray was laid.

“You know Muriel is to be introduced to the neighbourhood at the county ball, Mr Bennett,” said she, her bracelets tinkling as she took up some fancy-work. “It seems a very short time since she was running about here, and learning easy lessons, does it not?”

"The time seems longer when one looks at her,—one sees it has been time well spent," said Ronald.

"That is a compliment to me, since I have had the care of her. I confess I am proud of her, and she has been greatly admired," said Miss Alicia, seizing a moment when Muriel had gone to call her father from the library. 'This young man was evidently improved, and it might be judicious to seem to take him a little into her confidence. "Of course," she continued, "I feel very anxious as to her future: with her prospects and her beauty, she will be so much sought after."

"No doubt; either would bring her admirers, and together they should vanquish every one."

Miss Alicia glanced up from her work. This was not the sort of remark she had expected; young Bennett had become wonderfully self-assured.

In truth, Ronald was watching his ancient foe with amusement. He read her thoughts pretty accurately, and felt cool enough to reply to her covert hints: indeed he wondered now why he had so hated her—it seemed to him that he had outgrown both his dislike and her power to annoy.

Sir Duncan's entrance interrupted the brief *tête-à-tête*, and the talk flowed on pleasantly in various channels,—so pleasantly indeed, that Ronald forgot to be anxious as to the right moment for departure, and rose at last with a perfectly natural and courteous apology for having stayed so long.

“How wonderfully he is improved! he has really some manners now,” said Miss Alicia, when he was gone. Sir Duncan was silent.

“Do you not think him improved, papa?” said Muriel.

“In manners, of course he is. I always said the boy was a gentleman at heart.”

"What is it, then, papa? you are doubtful about something."

"I do not know, my pet—it is a mere impression,—but if that fellow is ever a minister, I shall be very much surprised. Old Bennett fancies it is a sort of duty to make him one; but if he had a grain of sympathy with the boy, he would see that his bent is quite another way."

"Couldn't you speak to him, papa?"

"I did so once, but he did not like it; and it is hardly possible to advise a man about his family affairs, unless he asks one. You think it is my function in life to meddle with everything, Muriel," replied Sir Duncan, smiling fondly at the bright face.

"Of course I do, papa, because you have a wiser head than most people," she replied merrily, and the conversation dropped.

Meanwhile Ronald as he walked home was continuing the conflict that had been

raging in his breast since last night. Had he worn his heart upon his sleeve to such an extent that every one must warn him that Muriel was beyond his reach? Did he need to be told it, when he knew it, felt the knowledge, at every bitter moment of the day?

Did his mother think him so conceited a fool as to fancy, for one moment, that—that—oh, it was impossible! And yet, how well he understood his pretty play-mate! how quickly he could sympathise with her thoughts, her opinions, as she expressed them this afternoon, on so many subjects! He almost wished it were not so: if he had had different tastes, he might have been quieter and happier, as his mother had said. But being, as he was, full of health and strength, and longing for a free and active life, and believing, moreover, that there could be no more love of woman for him, why should he not free

himself at once, even though at the cost of his father's anger and his mother's tears? Ah! there was the chain that bound him, and that he had not the courage to break. Still, he would make an attempt; he would speak to her some night when they were alone, and sound her. And he would go to Stirling, and—somehow or other—see Muriel at the ball.

They had all spoken of the ball, but no one had asked him if he would be there; he was of another world. How he would have liked to go, to face her in a ball-room, and see if she would have the courage to dance with him! Yet why should he wish so to try her? His evening clothes were growing too tight for him, and he could not get more at present; and he was a bad dancer—he knew that. Besides, what business could he have at a ball? Such places were not for men of his cloth, he thought bitterly, and was gloomy and silent all the evening.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEYOND HIS GRASP.

ON the day of the county ball, Ronald begged his mother to leave the house-door unlocked, as he was going out, and would not be home till late.

“Where are you going?” she asked, quickly.

“I am going to Stirling.”

“To Stirling! Preserve us, laddie! you’re not so mad as to dream of going to yon ball? Your father——”

“Would never forgive me. Mother, I am not so dull of wit as you sometimes seem to think me. Make your mind easy. I am not going to appear at the ball; more

than that I cannot tell you. Now give me a kiss, and I will go."

Such a request was a very rare thing with Ronald; and his mother, as she watched him go down the road, comforted herself with the thought that he could not be intending any mischief, or he would not have kissed her. "He has played me many a prank, but he never deceived me yet," she said to herself—which was true, though he had been very near deceit in his reply to her a few minutes ago. It was true also that he had no very definite plan when he started: he did not wish to be observed and recognised, if he could help it; but he was determined, at any cost, to see Muriel among the possible aspirants respecting whom Miss Alicia professed herself so anxious.

A knot of boys at the door of the building where the ball was to take place attracted his attention; and as he looked, one

or two idlers joined the group. They were going to stand on the flight of steps and watch the arrivals,—police supervision being a thing unknown. Here was a chance for Ronald: his quick eye noted that any one on the uppermost step would be invisible to those coming up, on whose faces the strong lamp-light from the entrance-hall must strike. He secured the place in a moment, and ensconcing himself somewhat behind a pillar, prepared to wait till the Inverallan party should arrive.

A considerable time elapsed, during which ladies and gentlemen came, at first by twos and threes, then in a more continuous stream. Ronald listened to the comments of his neighbours on the steps, and gazed without much interest, though, perhaps, the sight of the pretty faces and the glimpses of rich colours and scented bouquets were not without their effect. At last, seen dimly behind their divided breath,

the well-known grey horses came rapidly round the corner, and three carriages drew up. Miss Alicia got out of the first, and passed up with her companions. From the second, two gentlemen alighted, Sir Duncan and another, and handed out Muriel, who came up the steps on her father's arm. Ronald felt, rather than saw, that she was in shining white, and that she looked more radiant than ever.

As she passed out of his sight, his eye fell on the gentleman who was following her, and he recognised Captain Leslie, the skater with whom she seemed to be on such pleasant terms. Darting down to the street, he hurried to the back entrance of the building, and obtained speech of one of the purveyors, who not unfrequently came in summer to the kirk at Tillybodle. "Was there any place where he could possibly see the dancing?" "Oh yes; there was a bit of a gallery, where two or three

of the ladies'-maids and their friends were standing : he could get in there, no doubt. Oh, of course, he quite understood—no need to say anything about it at Tillybodle ;” and with a wink and a laugh, the man showed Ronald the little stair by which he could reach the gallery.

Keeping in the background, he could still see the upper end of the ball-room, and in the very centre stood the Inverallan party. Sir Duncan was in the act of introducing a gentleman with a star on his coat ; and almost before Muriel had acknowledged his bow, a lady whose dress was blazing with diamonds came up, bringing another partner. A little farther along the room, Captain Leslie was being led up by an elderly dame to her two daughters, and Ronald fancied he could detect an impatient glance to the left as he bowed and made an entry rapidly on his card. The instant he was free he had glided round

behind Muriel ; and certainly there was a brighter pleasure in her eyes as he spoke to her.

This was evidently a pre-engaged dance, for there was no consulting of cards as he gave her his arm and moved with her out from the crush. For a few minutes they were immediately opposite the gallery, and in full view.

“There’s the beauty of the night,—Miss Forbes of Inverallan,” said one of the ladies’-maids.

“Who is the gentleman ? ” asked another.

“Captain Leslie,—Sir Francis Leslie of Ardenhaugh’s eldest son. She’s only just out, but they do say that will be a match.”

“And a handsome couple they’d be,” was the reply.

Ronald grew hot and cold as he listened. His vague impression, then, had not been without foundation. A match ! He was looking already at the man who would win

her. Good heavens, how beautiful she was! her small head was so daintily set on her fair shoulders, her pretty girlish figure was so well displayed by her white dress! The exquisite bouquet she carried was the only colour about her, save the rose on her cheek: she wore no ornament but a string or two of pearls, and a pair of quaint old bracelets with pearl clasps. Indeed her dress was the simplest in the room; and as Ronald observed the fact, he revelled in the beauty and fine taste that made her, as she stood there, the queen of the ball.

But now the music began softly, her companion bent and spoke to her, and she smiled brightly as she listened; his arm was round her, her hand in his. Ronald could have groaned aloud as he looked; and indeed he had unthinkingly prepared a torture for himself, of which, till he had felt it, he had had no conception.

He had imagined himself strong in the certainty that his love was futile—had fancied that he would like to see the girl he worshipped among her friends, winning admiration wherever she moved ; and now he found himself a sudden prey to the fiercest, maddest jealousy, unable to tear himself away, and yet feeding his passion and his despair as he watched her floating round the room. Evidently she and her partner were admirably paired for a ball-room, for their easy rhythmical motion was the perfection of dancing, and it was no wonder that she appeared to be enjoying herself thoroughly.

Again, and yet again, they danced ; and still Ronald watched, though his eyes ached and his head was dizzy with the heat and glare. Once there was a general move to supper, and he too stole down in search, not of food, but of something to quench his burning thirst.

Sir Duncan never liked late hours, and Muriel was among the first to say good-night. Ronald saw her shake hands with some of the dowagers, whose jewels and silks made the upper end of the room gorgeous; each and all of them had a kindly word for the bright young beauty whose *début* had been so complete a success, and the leave-taking was prolonged.

He slipped away and placed himself on a back-stair where a half-glass door commanded the hall. Presently Miss Alicia appeared, cloaked and hooded, her face somewhat weary but well content, and next followed the other ladies and Muriel. As she descended, Captain Leslie came forward from some corner where he had been waiting, and offered her his arm, which she accepted with a new shyness on her face. How gently he took her bouquet from her hand! Ronald fancied he was asking for a flower; certainly there was

a faint movement of assent, and the young man's features expressed quiet delight.

"The Inverallan carriage!" shouted a waiter, and the whole party hurried on, Ronald boldly opening the glass door and following them.

"Who's that wild-looking fellow?" said one gentleman to another; but no one knew, and already he had mingled with the small remnant of the crowd. A boy uttered some rude jest as the ladies passed, and Ronald harshly bade him be silent. A girl with bright eyes spoke to him, and he turned from her and shuddered. With long strides he set off in the direction of Tillybodle, and was soon out of the town and beyond the reach of gas-lamps.

It was a dark night, and he had forgotten to bring a small lantern. The lights of the ball-room seemed to dance before his eyes, and he could not see the foot-path. But for the cold he would have

lain down under a hedge, so dazed and wearied was he in mind and body; but a keen wind was blowing from the Grampians, and forced him to proceed. Blindly stumbling into pools and over the edge of the path, he made but slow progress, nor cared for the wet or the lateness of the hour, his whole senses absorbed in the recollection of what he had seen.

The chill grey dawn was lifting the clouds in the east as he reached home; and entering quietly, he threw himself, dressed as he was, on the bed, and slept a feverish, unrefreshing sleep, till his mother herself came to call him. She began to reproach him for his unseemly state, but in the midst of her words she saw that he was not heeding her one whit, and with a disturbed mind she went away.

When he rose it was evident that he had caught a severe feverish cold, and

he yielded readily to her wish that he should go to bed again. It was a good excuse, and procured for him the solitude he desired—a solitude in which he might endeavour to attain to a more controlled state of mind.

After two days he came down again, and taking a chair by the fire, looked at his mother and began the subject on which he was most anxious for her sympathy.

“Mother,” said he, “you will be terribly disappointed, I suppose, if I say I cannot be a minister?”

“Disappointed is not the word: you would break your father’s heart.”

“I’ve not much fear of that, mother. He would never forgive me, I know; but he is a man, and can bear things,—it is of you that I am thinking.”

“Ronald, you don’t mean that you are really going to give up your work? You’re not in earnest?”

“Thoroughly in earnest, mother, and pretty near determined.”

“And pray what are you going to do, then? Supposing you fly in the face of sense and Providence, how are you going to get your living?”

“That I don’t know, but there must be work for me somewhere. At the worst, I could emigrate.”

“Emigrate! When you have had education and opportunities given you at home, you’d fling them all up, to go to some out-of-the-way colony? I always said no good would come of your books of travels. Just you see what your father says to it!”

“Then you won’t give me the least sympathy, or help me to persuade him—not though I tell you I am not fit for the ministry?”

Mrs Bennett looked at her son for a minute before she answered.

“It’s my belief that if a woman were

giving her life's blood for a man, drop by drop, he'd still tell her that she had not done enough."

Ronald made no reply. What did he know of his mother's passionate affection for him, her last-born, who came to fill her empty house? What did he know of the resolve that her child should be no idol, but should be given to the church? or of the trembling anxiety with which she had recognised in him her own quick temper, strong feelings, and ambition? He only thought that it was his life-blood, not hers, that was to be spent, if he were doomed to a distasteful existence.

That afternoon came a messenger from the Hall, with a little note to Mrs Bennett.

"Our long-talked-of theatricals are to come off at last," it ran: "Thursday night is fixed on, and I shall not have one minute to spare, or I would call instead of writing,

to say that I shall be very much disappointed if you and Ronald do not come. I suppose papa is right in saying that Mr Bennett would not join you, though I wish he would. You should not be later than eight, as I want you to get a good place, and there will be supper afterwards, when I shall expect to hear your criticisms. *Do* come, to please your affectionate

“MURIEL.”

“I’d like to see her act; but it’s out of the question, Mr Bennett would never allow it.”

“Is that possible, mother? Does he object even to private theatricals?”

“An unwholesome thing is not the wholesomer for being partaken of in private,” said Mr Bennett, who heard his son’s remark as he entered.

“And you think that there must be something unwholesome in a play?”

“I didn’t say the play was necessarily unwholesome, but the acting of it is.”

“In what way?”

“D’ye think it can be wholesome to see, or to be one of a parcel of girls dressing up, and thinking of their *rouge*, and their clothes, and their speeches, and showing themselves off, and very likely jealous of each other’s success?”

“I should say it depended on the girls themselves.”

“Is that what ye mean to teach—that play-acting’s a wise occupation for reasonable women?” asked Bennett, grimly; but without waiting for a reply, he turned to his wife and handed her the note, which he had read.

“You’ll tell her that you can’t go,” said he.

“You might think it over to-night, James. I’m sorry to vex her, and I should like to go.”

"No need to think it over, wife. It is not a fitting thing."

"*I am going,*" said Ronald, very quietly.

"You mean that?"

"I do, father; a man must stand or fall by his own conscience, not another's."

"James! James!" cried Mrs Bennett, who saw the stern look she dreaded gathering on her husband's brow, "come away with me a moment; let me speak to you before you blame him, my dear!" Linking her hands round his arm, she led him into his study, and then dropped upon a chair and burst into tears.

She was spending her life-blood on this afternoon, when she stood between the two she loved, and strove to avert the impending inevitable quarrel.

Strange to say, either her agitation, or a sudden compunction on Bennett's part, or a dim perception that he had been over-severe, made him reluctantly consent that

she should accompany Ronald to the Hall.

She was really desirous of seeing the theatricals, but she also wished to see her son and Muriel together. They had met now and again at the manse; but on these occasions it was to her that the girl chatted, and Ronald seldom spoke at all. Perhaps under other circumstances it might be different, and Muriel might innocently be encouraging him in the madness which, his mother feared, possessed him. If so, she must warn her—must sacrifice her visits, her gay intimacy, if need were, at least until Ronald should be gone.

Ronald himself thought it more than probable that his mother would, sooner or later, discover his secret; and the time of discovery mattered little to him. He looked forward to the performance with mixed feelings: now longing for the moment to come when he might sit and

watch without stint the face he loved ; and again, steeling himself to endure the sight of Leslie playing, perhaps, a lover's part. In dreading this, however, he failed to understand Muriel's delicate good taste : it was indeed because of her fear of such a contingency that the theatricals had been deferred.

It had seemed natural at first that she and Captain Leslie should be cast for the parts of hero and heroine, as he was undoubtedly the best actor of the party ; but when, in the quiet of her own room, Muriel read over the play, and realised that he would kneel at her feet and utter those glowing words, which she had glanced at so carelessly some days since, they assumed a new aspect, and she knew that it would be impossible for her to listen to them.

It was not difficult, on one pretext or another, to defer the play for a few days ;

but when all excuses were wellnigh exhausted, Leslie himself came to her assistance.

“Do you know, I think we could arrange our parts much better than we have done, Miss Forbes,” said he, snatching a moment when no one was within hearing. “Mr Tennant would play the young squire very well, and I should greatly prefer the part of the merchant. Would you like that arrangement?”

“Oh yes; I think it would really be much better,” said Muriel, in a tone of relief.

Leslie bent a little over the book, as he held it towards her: “I could not play that part with you before an audience. The play would cover too much earnest.”

Muriel's cheeks were glowing, but she glanced up for a second, and he read her eyes.

“Tell me,” he said, eagerly, “why have

you made so many difficulties about this affair? Was it—forgive me if I am mistaken — was it because that part was given to me?”

“Yes.”

“My queen! This is neither the place nor time for more; I see the others coming. Sit down and look over the book here,” and with a quick gesture he placed a chair for her, and intercepting with some remark the ladies who were coming towards them, gave Muriel time to recover her composure.

An hour later, her father sent her to the library to listen in happy earnest to her lover; and so it came about that he did not appear in the character on that Thursday night, when Ronald had expected him to do so.

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE BRINK OF DECISION.

SIR DUNCAN made some conditions in admitting Leslie's suit. The engagement was not to be announced till after the theatricals were over and the guests had departed, and the marriage was not to take place till after Muriel's next birthday. He began by demanding longer grace, but Leslie and Miss Alicia talked him over.

The latter was more than satisfied. Her niece had won golden opinions everywhere, and was justifying them fully by making a brilliant marriage. Besides, it was likely to be a happy one; and Miss Alicia was womanly enough to admit that she was

very glad it should be so. She was more tender-hearted than of old; and though she would not have tolerated the idea of a marriage made only for love, it was a great thing when rank and fortune brought love as part of the dower.

Of course the theatricals were a complete success. There is nothing like genuine happiness for developing unsuspected talents and redoubling every power. Muriel acted as she never would act again, and electrified her audience by her spirit and pathos. She was giving voice, in fact, to the new feelings that had rushed into existence; and as the play happened to express much of her own sentiment, she was carried away by it as she never could have been but for the event that had stirred her being to its depths.

In one scene, in particular, she spoke with dignified fervour. A lover, doubting for a moment between the conflicting claims

of love and duty, consults his lady as to the course he should pursue. Turning upon him with a voice of scorn, she exclaims—

“ You ask me that, yet say you honour me !
If I could bid you honour duty less
Than other men, I surely were myself
Dishonourable !

Lover. Then you say a man
May waste his heart on duty's barren breast,
And love you after—but a little less !

Lady. Who loves me more, but shames himself and me !
To him who strives, who patiently achieves,
Who dares not sell his truth to win success,
To him I give—myself. To the poor soul
Who creeps through life, afraid of all the world,
Fawning upon it for its cheap, loud praise,
Traitor to truth and slave to every tongue,
I'd give——

Lover. Well, say it.

Lady. Pity's scanty crumbs,
Fit for the craven that dare win no more !”

The utter scorn of the closing lines, the flashing eye, the proud mien of the speaker, brought the house down, and the words and look seemed to burn themselves in on Ronald's brain.

“ Traitor to truth and slave to every

tongue!" Was not that just his case? or rather, would it not be his case if he were to yield blindly against every instinct of nature and scruple of conscience to his father's will? Why, after hearing her speak to-night, the tone of her voice would never cease to haunt him were he to play the craven's part. She had decided his fate for him in uttering that speech, and he would lose no time in telling his father his determination.

Having arrived at this conclusion during the brief space of time that elapsed between the acts, he felt lighter-hearted, and attended more genially to the rest of the performance. Already a weight seemed to be lifted off his shoulders, and his elastic nature began to reassert itself.

Soon the play was over, and the guests, leaving the extemporised theatre by a different door, moved into the long picture-gallery, where the actors, still in costume,

joined them and received their congratulations. Mrs Bennett, from a recess where she had found a seat, saw Muriel's eyes searching the crowd, and exchanged a bright glance with her. As rapidly as she could, the girl came forward.

"Well, mamsie, how good of you to come! Did you like it?"

"My dear, I think it was charmingly acted, and the piece is full of spirit. Every one is praising you!"

"I hope you were pleased too, Ronald?"

"I was much more than pleased, Miss Forbes. I was going to ask if I might have the play to read over?"

"Of course; I will send it to-morrow. Now come away to supper. There is to be no formal arrangement."

"Then may I take you in?" said Ronald quickly, offering his arm.

"Oh, I am sorry I can't; I am engaged," answered Muriel, with unusual want

of ease, and blushing brightly; "but will you take Miss Fraser?" she added, as a young lady came up to them on her father's arm. "Dr Fraser will take you, mamsie."

While the elders exchanged cordial greetings, for they were old acquaintances, Ronald with a bad grace gave his arm to Miss Fraser. All his touchy temper was aroused at the thought that Muriel would not go in to supper with him in the presence of her grand friends; nor was he much comforted by the light that dawned upon him as he saw an actor, whose disguise he had not penetrated, carry her off with an air of appropriation.

"That is Captain Leslie; isn't he well disguised? It was a good idea not putting the real names on the programme; it was better fun finding people out. Isn't Captain Leslie looking well? He is very handsome," said Miss Fraser.

"Very," replied Ronald, drily; and the

young lady found him but a taciturn companion.

Next day Muriel's own pony-carriage came to the manse, with a note begging Mrs Bennett to drive up and hear something of importance ; and greatly wondering what the news could be, she put on her bonnet and went. It was late when she returned, and the traces of recent tears in her eyes were hardly consistent with her smiling expression.

"Well, I've great news for you both," said she, entering the parlour where father and son were sitting. "I wonder if a man ever could keep a good fire on his hearth. I doubt it," she continued, stirring the coals into a blaze. "Can you guess my news?"

No need for one of the listeners to guess. Ronald knew it, and sat silent.

"Can a woman never speak out when she has anything to tell?" said Bennett, smiling.

"Muriel is engaged to Captain Leslie,

younger of Ardenshaugh. The marriage is not to be for six months yet; her father thinks her too young. And he is terribly vexed, he tells us, because Captain Leslie won't leave the army; and Muriel herself does not wish it. She says no man shall turn idler for her."

"Why can't he go home and attend to his duties there, instead of following that godless profession?" inquired Bennett.

"Because his father won't allow him to do anything on the place, Sir Duncan says. But he—Sir Duncan, I mean—wants him to settle at Inverallan; he'd find plenty to do there."

"And he refuses?"

"Only for the present. He wants to become a major, I believe, or something of that sort, before he gives up his profession. A very pleasant and handsome young fellow he seems to be."

"Ay, wife! It's wonderful how pleas-

ant and handsome a young man is always accounted when he has just engaged himself to a girl."

"Well, you shall judge for yourself, for Muriel and he are coming to call to-morrow ; and if you don't consider him good-looking, I shall think little of your taste."

"When are they coming?" Was that hollow voice Ronald's that spoke?

"Between four and five," replied his mother, without looking at him. She did her best for him, poor mother: she never allowed her anxious eyes to light upon him, nor asked him to say a word of goodwill; and he was grateful to her for her tact.

One word she herself said, however, not long before the visitors were expected—"You'll see Muriel and wish her joy, Ronald, when she comes?"

"I will see her, mother," he answered, shortly; but she heard him leave the house soon after four. He had only gone into

the garden, where he loitered, till, seeing the two figures advancing, he met them at the gate, and wrung Muriel's hand.

"I wish you every happiness," he said, in a low but steady voice.

"Thank you, Ronald. You have met Captain Leslie before, I know."

"Yes," replied Ronald, unable to refuse the young man's proffered hand. "You must excuse my turning back with you; I am obliged to go out this afternoon."

"What a pity! I thought you were sure to be in, and I wanted you and Frank to see each other. However, it can't be helped, and you will have many opportunities of meeting."

"Fewer than you think, perhaps," said Ronald enigmatically, and lifting his cap, passed out at the gate.

"What can he mean?" said Muriel. "How odd he is sometimes! I cannot understand him."

"I daresay not," replied Leslie. "I fancy I know more about him than you do."

"You! But you've only seen him once or twice."

"True. I'll tell you about it by-and-by. Here is Mr Bennett."

The minister was obliged to confess to himself that his wife had by no means overpraised the young soldier. He even forgot for a while, in talking to him, that he was a man of war; and the subsequent half-hour was pleasant to every one, for Leslie had the good taste to appreciate Mrs Bennett's old-fashioned courtesy, and Muriel was happy in seeing those she loved making friends.

It was strange that, though the visitors stayed so long a time, Ronald did not come in; and as soon as they left, Muriel asked Leslie to explain, as he had promised, the remark he made on entering.

"My darling, did it never occur to you

that that poor lad worships the very ground you tread on?"

"Oh, Frank, how dreadful! Oh, it can't be true!" exclaimed Muriel, standing still and blushing.

"I am certain it is true. I saw it the day we met him at the loch; and, Muriel, I am almost sure he was watching you from behind a door at the Stirling ball. Don't cry, darling; it is no fault of yours, or of his either."

"But it seems so terribly unkind to make an old friend—my dear mamsie's son, too—unhappy. Oh dear, I am afraid you are right! I never dreamt of it, though I thought him very odd and abrupt. Poor dear Ronald! Oh, Frank, I am so glad I am going to Ardenshaugh to-morrow! I could not bear to see him again."

"I would not have told you, dear, if you had not been going away. When you return, if he is here, you can see less of him.

It will be better for him," said Leslie, looking into the sweet face that seemed to him made to win love.

Even while the lovers were talking of him, Ronald, from his place of concealment in the little wood behind the village, had seen them go, and had returned to the house, seating himself in the parlour. Without any allusion to the visitors who had just left, he plunged into the subject of his own future, and announced his fixed determination to choose a profession for himself.

Mrs Bennett made no attempt now to interpose between him and his father. The storm she had foreseen and dreaded must break at last, and she must endure it as best she could.

Long and hotly did the old man argue, but to all that he said his son made but one reply—"My heart is not in it; I should be a traitor to truth were I to go on."

Such an answer should have appealed to

Bennett's sense of justice, but he was too unused to opposition, too resolved on carrying out his cherished scheme, to be open to conviction; and when he found that argument was of no avail, he launched into reproaches, which stung Ronald into rash reply.

Then indeed Mrs Bennett strove to stem the torrent of bitter words.

"Oh, hush, hush!" she cried, "before you say what you'll neither of you be able to forget, though you try."

"I shall never forget as it is, mother," said Ronald, harshly.

"I think you'll break my heart between you," she exclaimed. "James, he's but young; can you not be gentler to him? And oh, laddie, what blessing can go with a life that begins in ill-will?"

"Can a blessing go with a lie, mother?"

"No; I don't mean that you should go against your own wish. I can't help it,

James; I've seen for years that the bairn was not of the nature to take to the Kirk. I hoped he'd change, but it wasn't to be."

"Both against me! Well, it is the lot of some to stand alone. Take two days to consider the matter, Ronald; if you are then of the same mind, you may go your ways—I can do no more for you." So saying, Bennett left the room.

"Could Sir Duncan help you to any work?" began Mrs Bennett; but Ronald interrupted her.

"If my father casts me off, I'll stand alone. I'll not go to Sir Duncan to beg for help, and have his daughter and her lover talking over my affairs."

"And you'll add to our burden and care, and lose a good chance of a settlement of some sort, because of a bit of wilful pride. You're not a man yet, Ronald; you're just a headstrong bairn!" replied his mother, indignantly.

There was little slumber at the manse that night, but Ronald's was the soundest; he had the faith of youth in the future, and felt himself all but free. Before he slept he wrote a note to Muriel, in which, with an apology for taking up her time, he pointed out to her how her influence had told upon him, how her words in the play had decided him, and then begged her to give him her opinion on his present conduct, and say if she thought him justified in going against his father. "He and my mother both blame me, though for different reasons; and if my old friend could give me a word of sympathy, it would make things easier. I shall be grateful if you will say nothing of my difficulties to Sir Duncan; I would rather not be the cause of more discussion. Only let me have your own views, and they will be enough for me." Thus he wrote, and signed himself, "Yours faithfully always, R. B."

It was a foolish note, but he thought that

the answer to it would be a treasure that he would fain bear away with him when the terrible moment of parting should come ; and in the heat of passion that thrilled him, he was unaware of the force of his own words. Had he re-read the letter in the morning, he might have modified some of its phrases ; but he was too confident to have any doubts as to his own coolness or sense, and closed the envelope after once perusing the newly written contents.

Early the next morning, without mentioning his intention to his mother, he put the note in his pocket, and set out to walk by the nearest avenue to the Hall. As he went, he thought dreamily over his short past : the friendships and quarrels of the village school ; the happy days when Muriel stayed at the manse ; the rambles about the hills ; the deep glen in Dumyat, beyond which the bare moor spread ; the black pool of Jeira, where the trout lay hidden ; the

birchen copse and bracken-covered braes, where he had lain for many a truant hour listening to the wild cry of the grouse, and watching the windy white clouds scud across the blue sky.

He loved every rock and knowe of the broad hill, from the grey "screes" where the yellow mullein flowered, to the bare crest from which he could gaze over rich plain and silver Forth, away to the more distant Highland mountains. And everywhere about the place, mingling with every association, came the name of Muriel: every boyish adventure had been told to her; in every homely pleasure she had shared; with her he had talked over ambitions, dreams, and treasured tales; and this happy intercourse had lasted without flaw or break until her aunt came. Since then, though he had been deprived of her companionship, he had only thought of her the more; each of his familiar haunts had become the home of sweet

fancies, in which she reigned supreme. At college, when he left town and sought the slopes of the Braid Hills, or the crest of Arthur's Seat, from which his own dear Ochills could be seen, every fresh breeze and fair flower and song of bird uttered to him the name of Muriel; and when love of country and love of woman are thus closely twined together, they form a passion that may last a lifetime—such a passion as lies hidden away among sacred memories in a man's heart, even though another woman should bear his name, and her children cling about his knee.

He had reached a turn in the Inverallan avenue, where a road leading to the back entrance branched off, when, glancing towards the house, he saw that several figures were standing on the lawn inspecting some young horses which were being trotted up and down. He could distinguish Muriel and her father, and he thought it

was Captain Leslie who stepped forward and mounted a restive animal that had proved too much for the groom. He could not go on there and himself present his note, nor did he care to face strangers; he would go by the other road, and give it to a servant.

As he entered the courtyard, he met Mrs Simpson on her way to the dairy.

“Mr Ronald! Were you seeking any one? The gentry’s all out on the lawn there, with the wild horses the Captain’s brought.” The housekeeper spoke almost suspiciously. What should this young man be coming round there for, she wondered.

“I saw there were visitors, Mrs Simpson, and did not care to stop and see them. I only want to leave this note for Miss Forbes,—I am anxious she should have it to-day,” said Ronald, with the anxiety very visible on his face. “Perhaps you will see to it. You might give it to her

when she is disengaged," he added, hesitatingly. He did not like to say, "when she is alone."

"Yes, I'll take charge of it," she replied, and Ronald returned as he had come.

"What can he be wanting, writing to Miss Muriel, I'd like to know," thought Mrs Simpson, dropping the note into a capacious pocket. "She's enough to attend to without being troubled wi' the likes o' him; and she's going off, too, in an hour."

There are accidents into which it is as well never to inquire too curiously. Human nature is strangely sly, even in communing with itself. Mrs Simpson did not distinctly say to herself that she would not deliver the note—that would have been a breach of duty: but she could send it up a little later, when the horses were gone, and the ladies should have come in, and Miss Muriel should be disengaged; and meantime, though the footmen were close at hand in the pan-

try to carry it, her pocket was a safe place to put it in.

It was late before the horses were sent round ; luncheon had to be eaten hurriedly and last orders given ; the carriage was at the door, and the whole party set off for Ardenshaugh only just in time to catch their train.

The note was not delivered before they left, and was thereafter genuinely forgotten. Mrs Simpson had much to see to in her master's absence. Certain changes were to be made in the house : she put on a commoner dress next day, and Ronald's note remained in the pocket of the one she hung up in her closet.

CHAPTER X.

THE DIE IS CAST.

RONALD waited patiently, longingly, wonderingly, at last angrily, for the reply to his letter that never came.

Was this the end of Muriel's friendship? Could she not spare time or attention to enable her to write him one kindly word? Could she not sympathise with him in his trouble, or was she perchance angry because he had told her that he owed so much to her influence? Had that touched her pride? Oh, that could hardly be! Perhaps it was Leslie's doing—he might have seen Ronald's letter, and forbidden her to reply.

Well, whatever the cause, it was clear that he would ask for neither help nor sympathy again. He must, as he had said, stand or fall alone.

The two days' grace his father had accorded him had elapsed. Bennett had sternly determined that the backslider must be admonished, all the more faithfully since he was his own son; and he did not spare to carry out his determination. Ronald listened doggedly to the admonition, which, while it exposed his weakness, his want of faith, his obstinacy, his unfilial self-will, showed also that his father failed to understand either his scruples or his regrets. He made no attempt to reply; but he kissed his mother fondly as he bade her good-night, and before day broke he was on his road to Edinburgh.

There was a sound in the manse of "an exceeding bitter cry" when, led by some secret uneasiness early to his room, his

mother saw the untouched bed and realised that he had fled from his home.

Never in their previous sorrows had her husband seen her give way to such vehement grief; and with her wailing fresh in his ears, he hurried to make all possible inquiries, and though he struggled to keep up a show of sternness, his self-confidence was, in truth, somewhat rudely shaken.

He could obtain no clue to the secret of his son's flight. Knowing every short cut well, Ronald had avoided the neighbouring railway stations, and had walked a considerable distance before he took a Fife train, and so crossed the ferry to Edinburgh.

All trace of him was completely lost, and ugly fears were whispered about as to his safety. Meanwhile, in the town he had many a narrow escape of recognition; but by carefully avoiding the streets and hours in which he was most likely to meet his friends, he did escape, and soon his appearance was so

altered that a careless passer-by would not have known him.

Who has not heard of the pitiful struggles, the bitter disappointments, that await the needy who have no recommendation but their need, and no companion but their hunger? It is so terribly easy for a hot-headed boy to slip out of his place in the world, so easy to baffle pursuit, so easy to secure oblivion, except at some one fire-side; but having slipped away in search of freedom and a living, the first seems often purchasable only at the price of the last.

Ronald had a small sum of money belonging to him. Lady Forbes had presented him, in his babyhood, with a note, which had been accumulating for him in the bank ever since; but the deposit-receipt was at the manse, and he would not write for it—to do so would be to confess himself beaten: and so, with some pounds

lying in his name at Tillybodle, he often lacked a meal in Edinburgh. His mother, who steadily refused to believe that harm had befallen him, trusted that before long he would claim this very receipt ; but she did not guess the extent of his obstinate pride.

Sometimes he earned a few shillings by copying ; once he was paid for an article in the old debating-club style, which he took to a second-rate paper. But precarious work would not do, and no one would take a clerk without a single reference of any kind, nor even a respectable home address.

Ronald sank lower as day by day went hopelessly by. He grew more slovenly, less active in searching for work, and would even earn a stray sixpence by taking a message, and spend more of it on whisky than on food, loitering afterwards about the doors of the public-house.

Of his mother he thought as little as

possible, striving to ignore her pain, and nourishing his pride by dwelling on his father's harsh and stern ways. Sometimes he wondered if he should emigrate, but the old craving for adventure was gone. He had no money, and the prospect of working his way out was far less delightful when seen near at hand than when dreamt of at the manse fireside. A strange listlessness and disinclination for exertion oppressed him and made him shrink from any such decisive step. Poor lad! he did not know that want of food was rapidly telling on his young strength.

It was time, full time, that he should be saved, if saved he were to be, from losing himself altogether. Rescue came in the shape of a recruiting-sergeant, whose quick eye observed the broad shoulders of the youth who slouched in to get a glass at mid-day, eating hungrily the while a hunch of stale bread.

"You'd fare better than that with us, my lad," said he. "A fellow like you had better be serving the Queen than earning chance pennies in the street."

Ronald laughed. "I suppose I'm good enough to be food for powder at least, though for nothing else."

"You may do a good deal worse than take the shilling, young man. You speak as though you'd had education,—if you have, you'll soon get on."

"Get on to what, sergeant? Can you show me chapter and verse now?—I don't want any recruiting stories," said Ronald.

"I wouldn't try any on you," said the sergeant, who saw that this was not exactly a common recruit, and he proceeded to give a sufficiently business-like account of a soldier's prospects.

Ronald listened without evincing much interest, except when the man spoke of the chances of promotion. "Why, our own

colonel rose from the ranks," said he ; " and what one man has done, another may do."

At this Ronald's eyes flashed, and with barely a moment's pause for reflection, he threw his cap on to the table : " On with your ribbons, then ; I may as well try soldiering—it'll be a change, anyhow !"

If the sergeant smiled at the phrase, Ronald did not observe it, and as he walked away, he hardly realised that he had bound himself without power to change.

A very few days of his new life recalled him to something of his former self : good food, clean quarters, and regular hours restored his body and his mind, and he shuddered as he thought of the depths to which he had sunk during the short time that had elapsed since he left home. He even determined that he would write and tell his mother of the step he had taken ; but again the remembrance of his father's angry scorn made him pause, and while he hesitated he

was recognised by a gentleman who, as he passed up to the Castle, glanced with a professional eye at the squad of recruits engaged in the mysteries of the balance-step.

Inquiry satisfied him of the correctness of his surmise, and he left Edinburgh in consequence by an early train.

"Muriel, I have found your missing man," said he, as he entered the drawing-room at Ardenshaugh.

"Oh, Frank! where? What has he been doing?" she exclaimed, while Sir Duncan looked up from his book.

"That I don't know, but he is now a private in the 2d Highlanders. I saw him drilling at the Castle."

"Enlisted! How angry his father will be! and oh, what a blow for poor Mrs Bennett!"

"I thought he'd do that," said Sir Duncan. "He'll make a capital soldier—the life will just suit him."

“But, papa, a private soldier’s is hardly the position one expected for him—with his education, too. Oh dear, I’m sorry!”

“He could scarcely afford to be an officer,” said Leslie.

“No, of course not, though it is very wrong that that should be so, Frank. But can’t we find anything better for him than to be a private? Can’t we buy him off?”

The result of this conversation was, that a telegram was sent at once to the manse, and was followed next day by Sir Duncan in person. What passed there surprised even him, well as he knew the pride and reserve of the couple with whom he had to deal.

At the news of his son’s bodily safety Mr Bennett recovered his composure, and launched into invectives against the profession, which, as he said, Ronald must have known that he disapproved and condemned.

The mother, shaken as she was by grief and anxiety, shed fresh tears of joy on hearing that her boy was found, but sided so far with her husband, that she thought Ronald was lowering himself utterly by enlisting in the ranks. "He might have avoided that, at least," she said, "knowing his father's views."

That he should be bought off appeared to be the only course open to them; and Sir Duncan offered to use his interest with a friend in Texas, and endeavour in that way to get him congenial employment on a cattle-ranch.

"You'll never tie that boy to desk or books," said he; "he's made for action, and he must have it."

Having come at last, and after a long discussion, to these conclusions, Sir Duncan went to Edinburgh and saw the colonel of the regiment, to whom he confided Ronald's story.

"There's the making of a good soldier in him," said he, "if he can submit to discipline. I suppose he has never had much of it anywhere?"

"No; his father was too severe and harsh, and that produced the usual results."

"Exactly. Well, he has been in trouble already, and unless he turns over a new leaf, of course we can do nothing for him. You had better use your influence with him, and either get him to take his discharge, or keep straight. I'll send him to you, and leave you to talk it over."

Private Bennett having been desired to go to the Colonel's quarters, entered the room with a certain expectation of recognition in some shape or other, but was unprepared to find himself face to face with Sir Duncan. He would have retreated, but his old friend grasped him by the hand, and he could not resolve to turn away from his cordial greeting. Why, indeed, should he?

He would, and could, stand his ground now.

“Well, Ronald, I am heartily glad to see you,” began Sir Duncan; “I have been very anxious about you, my boy.”

“Have you, Sir Duncan? You have always been a good friend to me,” answered Ronald.

“I have meant to be so, at least. Now I have come in on purpose to see you, and talk matters over with you.”

“As my father’s friend, or mine?” asked Ronald, sharply.

“First of all, as yours. I have a message for you besides.”

“How did you find me out?”

“Leslie saw you yesterday on the parade. He fancied you might not like to be recognised by a comparative stranger, though I cannot quite see why, as he is one of our family, as it were. He came at once back to Ardenshaugh. I wired to your mother,

went to see her this morning, and here I am !”

“You have taken a great deal of trouble about me, Sir Duncan,” replied Ronald, in the same stiff tone as before.

“Good heavens, Ronald ! what has come to you ? You speak almost as if I were a slight acquaintance, who could hardly be expected to care what became of you ! Have we deserved that at your hands ? I think our constant friendship for your mother is sufficient guarantee of the interest we take in you.”

“As I said, the interest *you* take, Sir Duncan, has stood the test of time, and I am grateful for it.”

Sir Duncan looked puzzled, as well he might, and somewhat annoyed. “I do not understand your emphasis ; but let that pass,” he replied,—“we had better come to business. Do you like your new profession well enough to remain in it ?”

"It will feed and clothe me as well as any other," returned Ronald, doggedly.

"Then, of course, you have no intention of getting on in it; you mean to remain an ordinary private always?"

"That's as may be."

"It is as you choose, you mean. I confess, Ronald, I am near being disappointed in you. I never thought you would reconcile yourself to being a clergyman. I saw that your bent was in quite another direction, and I advised the army for you long ago."

"Did you indeed?" said Ronald, looking up.

"I did; but your father would not hear of it. Now I will say this,—I do not think myself free from reproach concerning you; for though it is true I had no grounds for interference, I might have sought out some better position for you, and offered it to your father, seeing as I did that you were

by nature unfitted for the Kirk. On the other hand, my boy, I did not think that when the matter had to be decided, you would have run away without one attempt to consult me, or one hint that you needed help. It was not kindly done, Ronald."

"No, Sir Duncan, it was not ; but I think I have been madman or fool, or both," said Ronald, in a low voice. As he sat here now in his coarse white jacket, and recollected that if an officer were to come in, he must get up and, before his old friend, salute and say "Sir," he realised keenly what a blunder he had made, and at that moment would have given any treasure to be free again. Still, as the conversation went on, he could not bring himself to accept Sir Duncan's offer to buy him off : he felt as though such an admission of error would destroy his self-respect ; for how could he bear to receive help from Muriel's father ? He promised, indeed, to

write to his mother, but he begged that she would not come to see him, at least for the present.

To his father he would send no message ; nor indeed did Sir Duncan wonder, for Mr Bennett had refused to contribute in any way to his son's maintenance if he left the army, nor would he even assist him to do so. "He has made his bed, and he must lie on it," said he, and altogether declined to listen to Sir Duncan's proposals of a compromise.

"These short-service rules will benefit you, at least," said Sir Duncan ; "you will be very young still at the end of six years—young enough to start afresh in another line if you like ; but you must let me remind you that it is for you to determine what position you are to occupy when that time comes. If you, with your educational advantages, do not rise, you will most unmistakably have fallen."

“You will say of me as you once did of Jamie Paterson, ‘Gone wrong for want of spirit enough to do right.’ I suppose you have been told of all my delinquencies by the Colonel?” said Ronald, with an air of something like defiance, though he had softened visibly during the previous conversation.

Sir Duncan repeated what the Colonel had said, adding, “No doubt it is hard for you to submit at once to your change of position; but if you are not man enough to do your duty, you are not the man I thought you would be.”

“You always put things in such a way as to enlist me on your side, Sir Duncan. It is hard to be perfectly submissive and deferential to a sergeant who is an ill-tempered brute, or to a simpering sub-lieutenant who looks like a schoolboy.”

“You’re hardly more yourself, Ronald.”

“Quite true, but I have gone through

more than the young gentleman of whom I am speaking. However, Sir Duncan, you have shown me real kindness to-day, and I will try to prove that it is not misplaced. Tell my mother so; it is the best message I can send her."

"I will, my dear boy. And I hope you will let me have a line to say how you are getting on."

"Letters to be signed 'Private,' Sir Duncan; you never had a correspondent of my rank before!"

"The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that,"

replied Sir Duncan, quoting, as his daughter had done, one of the most truly national of Scottish songs.

After some further conversation he left the Castle, by no means easy as to Ronald's future, but still hoping that he might turn over a new leaf, and that discipline might train and improve him.

It was late that evening when he reached Ardenshaugh, and while waiting for dinner he spoke of the results of his visit.

“Bennett won’t be bought off, at least by me. I’m not sure but what he would have consented, if his father would even have shared the expense instead of washing his hands of the whole affair. He’s as proud as Lucifer.”

“I think the better of him for sticking to the profession, now that he has chosen it,” said Leslie.

A faint jingle of bangles indicated that Miss Forbes was raising her hands in surprise and horror.

“My dear Frank ! how can you think the better of the poor fellow for being a rough common soldier ? Such a good-looking lad, too, and with some cleverness.”

“Are good looks and cleverness so inappropriate in a soldier, aunt Alicia ?” asked Leslie, with gravity.

“Ah, you mean an officer, but this boy is a mere soldier ; it is a dreadful pity,” said Miss Forbes, who had changed her opinion of Ronald since Muriel’s engagement.

“I confess I don’t agree with you,” replied Leslie. “He need not remain a private ; and I can tell you, there are sergeants in my regiment whose education and manners are better than those of many men one meets. Take your ponderous neighbour, Hardwicke, for example ; give his fortune to one of these men, and they’d be ten times better company, and, thanks to their training, would look like gentlemen, which he never will.”

“For the best of reasons, that he is not one by birth,” said Miss Forbes, ignoring the rest of Leslie’s argument.

“Nor altogether by nature,—you should add that, aunt Alicia,” said Muriel. “Poor Mr Hardwicke is so good-natured and well-meaning that one can’t help liking him ; but

he is always wanting in little points of taste and manners that he cannot master, in spite of his twenty thousand a-year."

"Quite true, Muriel," said Sir Duncan ; "and I have always said that Ronald Bennett was a gentleman at heart,—a gentleman, you may say, by instinct. I fear he has lost himself a good deal of late, but I have faith in his recovering himself too. By the by, have you done anything to make him feel himself aggrieved, Muriel?"

"I ! No, papa—nothing whatever."

"It is very odd ; there is something in his mind that makes him touchy about you. He seemed to fancy that you took no interest in him—he said as much, in fact ; but of course I did not discuss the matter."

"How extraordinary !" said Muriel, blushing, however, so much, that her father fancied there must be something, some mistake perhaps, on the young man's part, that she did not wish to mention. In

truth, she was thinking of Leslie's surmise, and imagined that the strangeness of Ronald's manner confirmed it. She was unfeignedly glad to hear of him, and deeply interested in his career, for it seemed to her pitying heart that she might have unwittingly helped to drive him away, and in the fulness of her own happiness she grieved for his wasted love.

"Frank, shall I write to that poor fellow,—just a kind note, you know? I should not like him even to fancy that I thought less of him," said she, when alone with Leslie.

He reflected a moment before answering. He was hardly great enough to be on a level with Muriel's generous impulses.

"I think not," he replied. "He has chosen an inferior position, and I would rather you did not write to him, unless it were more necessary than it seems to be. Send him a message through his mother, when you go home."

' "Very well, dear," replied the girl; but though she said no more, Leslie felt that she was disappointed, and regretting that it should be so, did not think more kindly of the boy, whose name had more than once cast a shadow, light as gauze, across his bliss. That bliss was indeed so great that he, like Muriel, sometimes wondered how long it could continue.

The time of grace demanded by Sir Duncan before parting with his daughter had almost elapsed. In a couple of months Muriel would be eighteen, and as soon after that as the lawyers and dressmakers would allow, she would be Leslie's wife.

The more he saw of her, the better he appreciated the limpid purity and brightness of her nature. He had yet to learn its depth and strength and courage, when tried in circumstances less sunny than those in which she now lived.

With aunt Alicia, as he already called

Miss Forbes, he was on excellent terms. If he smiled good-humouredly at her elaborate attire, and was not too impatient of her talk, it was because he often sympathised with her conclusions, even when he was well aware of the absurdity of her reasonings. He had, in a modified degree, her faith in good birth and good breeding; but whereas she, womanlike, could not endure that any one should say she had done, said, or worn an incorrect thing, he considered that birth and breeding could only strengthen the reasonable independence that should make a man fearless of commonplace criticism.

Aunt Alicia was frequently puzzled by the apparent inconsistencies of his views, and never could understand why, while he equalled her in his love of family history and relics, he laughed at her two favourite arguments, "Other people always do it," and "What will people say?"

On one point Sir Duncan himself wished that his future son-in-law had been more accessible to the influence of general opinion. People undoubtedly did say a great deal when they were informed that the heir and heiress of Ardenshaugh and Inverallan were to spend the first year or two of their married life with a marching regiment.

How could Sir Duncan allow such a thing? Why did he not forbid the marriage, unless Captain Leslie came to his senses? Had there been any quarrel between old Ardenshaugh and his son? Ah! perhaps that was the reason; but then, why should not the young people live at Inverallan? Et-cetera, et-cetera, et-cetera.

Do we not all know how the tongues are loosed, and the secret ill-humours of human nature come out, when some one has laid him or her self open to criticism? and if there are two sinners to be canvassed, naturally the excitement is redoubled. What won-

derful suggestions, betraying the quality of the speaker's own mind, what subdued rejoicing over the fallibility of a neighbour, what heedless judgments founded on what complete ignorance, do we hear !

Leslie listened to the expostulations, somewhat softened as they were for his ear, and answered them as he answered Sir Duncan's graver entreaties.

“ I love my profession, and I do not want to give it up unless with a distinct prospect of other occupation. My father will give me none. You would give it me, Sir Duncan ; but you know you are as hale and strong as ever, and do not in the least require my help in managing your estate. My work with you would be a mere name. Muriel need have none of the discomforts of a soldier's life, for money can do away with them all, and not even for her can I turn myself into a complete idler.”

No one applauded this resolve more heart-

ily than Muriel herself, and she declared that a wandering life would have great charms for her, at least for some time to come. She had been such a stay-at-home, that change would be pleasant, and she looked forward to spending the following winter under the sunny skies of Malta.

This being decided, the gossips were forced to acquiesce, but they consoled themselves in their natural fashion by crediting the young people with all those peculiarities which after a fruitful discussion are usually summarised as "so extremely odd."

CHAPTER XI.

“WOO'D AN' MARRIED AN' A'.”

IT wanted but a week of the marriage, when Mrs Simpson, over-anxious perhaps about the coming festivities, was seized with a fainting-fit, which lasted sufficiently long to be alarming. In the weakness of recovery, she fancied herself worse than was the case, and begged that Miss Muriel might come to her at once. She, who was already in the room, stooped over the bed, and asked what she could do.

“In that drawer, my dear—the little one—a note—I'm sorry now—I hope I've

done no harm," gasped the poor woman, conscience-smitten.

Muriel opened the drawer, hoping to find a clue to the meaning of these broken sentences, and after some searching, discovered at the back, hidden under ribbons and remnants of work, Ronald's undelivered letter to herself.

Somewhat startled, she hastened to show it to the housekeeper, and a look of relief came into her tired eyes. Poor soul ! her little sin had weighed heavily on her ; but she had been too proud to confess it, though ever since Ronald's disappearance, his anxious face when he brought his letter had haunted her unwilling memory.

Up-stairs in the library Muriel read the note, and handed it to her father with an exclamation of distress.

"Oh, papa, no wonder Ronald thought me unkind ! How he must have blamed me for never answering this ! I must

write to him now and explain it,—don't you think so?"

"Certainly, my dear. Poor boy! he was singularly unfortunate, just when he needed encouragement and help; everything seemed to be against him. Write to him, Muriel, and I will add a line."

And Muriel wrote simply and generously, as to her old playmate, setting aside with womanly courage all consciousness that this man had loved her, and had in this very letter quite unwittingly betrayed his love.

She left her note unfolded on the table, and her father read it, and looked into her clear eyes and kissed her,—“That is well written, my darling,” said he, and added a few words on the same sheet. It was he who addressed the note, and the reply came to him by return of post.

“Tell your daughter that I thank her with all my heart for her letter, and wish

her every good thing that life can give. May her wedding-day be as happy as she deserves that it should be.”

This was all; then the writer proceeded to tell Sir Duncan that he was getting on excellently, and looking forward to rapid promotion.

Father and daughter read the letter together, and then Sir Duncan burnt it; nor did either of them allude to the subject again. They kept an honourable silence these two, even between themselves, over the boy's wild romance; nor did Muriel tell Leslie the incident of the missing note and subsequent correspondence. It was the only thing she ever hid from him.

The wedding-day was as bright and fair as bride could wish, and in every village and farm in the neighbourhood there was a stir of excitement and preparation. Muriel had determined that

there should be comparatively little entertainment beyond the breakfast for her own guests, but that everybody connected in any way with the estate should be feasted either on that or the succeeding days. So tents were spread, and bands engaged, and ample fare provided, and the guests came with cordial feelings to the feast, for Sir Duncan and his daughter were as much beloved as they were widely known.

The house and park at Inverallan were well suited for such festivities. The former was an irregular pile of building to which successive owners had made additions, each according to the fancy of the time, without paying much regard to the appearance of the entire mass. The result was more pleasing to the eye of an artist than to that of an architect; but if the interior arrangements were somewhat perplexing when domestic labours had to be

considered, still neither Sir Duncan nor his daughter would have altered a single quaintly planned passage, nor have levelled an unexpected step, that was to them a thought of one of their ancestors written in stone.

Sir Duncan himself had made but a single addition; he had enlarged and lengthened a room known before his time as the picture-room, but now as the picture-gallery, and had largely increased its contents. This gallery formed one side of a square, at the opposite side of which was the oldest part of the hall, a tower, whose main room on the ground-floor formed the library, while the small turrets at the corners were the delight of all children who visited them. From their narrow windows exquisite views could be obtained of the winding Forth, the picturesque rock of Stirling, the level lines of the Campsie Hills, and the distant mountains whose blue

crests rose above that region of romance where loch and glen, islet and copse, are celebrated, either by the pen of our great novelist, or by the sterner traditions of Highland life.

The park was not less fine in its way than the house of Inverallan. There huge sycamores spread their masses of dark foliage side by side with graceful beech and brilliant Spanish chestnut; here a peat-stained stream fresh from the hill, tumbled over rock and gravel on its way to join the wide, still Forth, — there a long slope of grass was crowned by a group of tall Scotch firs and gloomy yew, and now a wooden seat was placed against the trunks of two mighty larches, brought over long ago from their native land as precious rarities, and watched with heedful assiduity.

Everything about the place bespoke an affectionate care and reverence for the

relics of the past; and though Sir Duncan was a man who moved with the times, he valued the old plate, the china, the thin-legged tables and narrow cabinets, that had been the everyday companions of his “forebears,” far beyond the more costly furniture and chased silver with which he and his father had enriched the house, replacing the cups and dishes that had gone into the Prince’s coffers.

From the hall-door, two avenues branched off in opposite directions,—the one barely half a mile long, leading into the village, not far from the manse; the other winding through the park, so as to form a drive of some length, and finally coming out on a highroad near a distant part of the estate.

By each of these avenues on the wedding-day guests were to arrive, the tenant-farmers chiefly by the longer of the two, where the procession of dogcarts and spring-carts of all sorts and sizes wound merrily

between the overshadowing trees. For these, the larger number of the guests, dinner was spread in the picture-gallery, and there Sir Duncan was to preside; while those who arrived from the village were accommodated elsewhere, and attended to by other members of the family gathered for the occasion.

Miss Forbes moved from room to room on the eventful morning in a fever of anxiety. She had at first been greatly scandalised at the manner in which her niece meant to celebrate her marriage—it was so very peculiar of her not to entertain the neighbourhood in the accustomed way.

“But, my dear aunt,” said Muriel, when the matter was under discussion, “everybody is asked to the church, and almost everybody is asked to breakfast, and what more would you have?”

“There should have been a ball at least, my dear,” replied Miss Forbes, seriously.

“To what end? What would be the good of turning the house upside-down, in order that people who can go to as many balls as they like should come to another? No, I'm sure weddings are often a dreadful bore, and I believe that the county people will really be grateful to us for arranging as we have done.”

“I am sure of that,” said Sir Duncan; “no speeches—a standing breakfast, and then let them all turn out and see the other guests come, or join the school children in the tents and at the games till they like to go home. It's far pleasanter than the usual formality of a long breakfast that nobody wants, speeches that every one hates, and time on hand that no one can get rid of.”

“Oh, I know—you are as bad as Muriel, my dear brother. It is very strange that, though you are both so conservative in some things, I have never been able to

make you respect the customs of society sufficiently."

"My dear Alicia, people make customs. Now you always talk as though customs made people : they do so to a certain extent, but not altogether."

"But where is one to draw the line? You are so terribly independent. In a man, that matters less ; but I really believe, but for my training, Muriel might have developed into something that I shudder to think of."

"A strong - minded woman perhaps, aunt," laughed Muriel.

"Oh, I don't know what you might have done."

"I know what she would not have done," said Sir Duncan, looking at her fondly. "I admit, Alicia, that you have taught her wisdom of a sort that I have never mastered, and that a woman requires to learn. She needs the wisdom of the serpent, if she

is to mix with society, as well as the harmlessness of the dove. But that very harmlessness would have kept my girl within the line of prudence.”

“Ah! would it? I don't know where you draw that line, and I think a regard for social custom is the best safeguard.”

“Social custom being invariably right and wise and in good taste, you assume that, of course! I think the line is drawn first at what is right; secondly, at what is convenient. It is right for me to entertain my tenants and the folk generally about the place; it is convenient, therefore, not to entertain the county—and though that were a much more serious omission than it really is, I should not care a whit!”

“I daresay you're right; but who ever heard of a standing breakfast before? It is extraordinary,” said poor Miss Forbes, plaintively.

“Well, say it is all my fault—I shall

take it on my own shoulders; and you'll find, if the breakfast is ample and the champagne good, people will manage just as well as at a ball-supper, and the affair will take half the usual time."

After this decision, it was no wonder that Miss Forbes was somewhat restless and uneasy on the great morning. To do her justice, she was quite as anxious as her brother himself that the tenants and all the other people should be handsomely entertained; but she could not help looking sadly at the array in the dining-room, and repeating to herself, "It's nicely done, but I do wish Duncan would have let people go in properly, and sit down in their order. It would have been so much more dignified."

Gifts meanwhile had poured in from all quarters, and many of the humblest touched Muriel's heart deeply. Never had the servants heard their young mistress speak so

sharply as when she detected them in the act of hiding away trifles that they considered unworthy of display among the choicer presents. “You think of nothing but the money's worth,” said she, and displaced a silver casket, in order to make room for a carved bracket, the work of a lame boy at one of the farms. In the same spirit, she discarded on her wedding-day her handkerchief of costly lace, and asked for one on which a village girl had embroidered her initials. These, and such as these, were the little acts which proved Muriel Forbes to be true lady as she was true woman, for they were the outcome of a refined and gentle mind.

On the day before the marriage, there was a great looking-out of clothes, a tacking in of frills, and ironing of collars in Tillybodle. “Hae ye a'thing ready?” said Jamie Paterson's next-door neighbour, Mrs Grey, to Mrs M'Rorie, the butcher's wife.

“Ou ay,” replied she, pausing to rest her heavy market-basket on the door-step. “I’ve just come frae the shop, and wad ye believe it, Jamie Paterson was in buying half a pund o’ soap !”

“It’s no possible !”

“Fac’s deith.”

“Weel, that’s mair nor’s been in his hoose at ance this five year I’ve lived beside him !”

“’Deed is it. Miss Muriel wad be gey an’ pleased if she heard tell o’t—she’s aye speakin’ about cleanly ways.”

“Ay, she’s as neat’s a new preen hersel ; ye’ll no see her trapesin’ through the streets in a lang gown lickin’ up the stour ahint her.”

“No ; yon fashion suits best wi’ the leddies’-maids at Hardwicke’s place, disna it ? Gude nicht, I maun be steppin’.”

Next morning at an early hour Jamie Paterson looked in at his neighbour’s door

with a twinkle in his eye, and a face ruddy from the use of the half-pound of soap.

“Mrs Grey, hae ye a meenit to spare and a button ye could gie me? I'm needin' ane for my shirt. I can shoo that on mysel', but I'm no gude at this kind of wark,” said he, holding up a torn shirt-sleeve.

“I'll pit that richt directly, and here's a button. Man, ye're awfu' smairt-lookin' the day.”

“Weel, ye see, I dinna approve of marriages, or I'd hae been married mysel', and I'm no vera fond o' the gentry; but for a' that, I wadna like to bide awa' the day. Sir Duncan's a real gude man, and Miss Muriel's a gude-hearted lassie; she's aye gi'en me a ceevil word and a bonny smile, and I'll gi'e them a hand when they tak' oot the horses at the sooth gate. Maybe she'll no see me, but maybe she wull.”

Muriel's courage carried her bravely through the morning—through the long process of dressing when servants and brides'-maids crowd round, and a strange solemnity of feeling accompanies the putting on of the white robes that symbolise so much — through mamsie's tearful embrace and tender retouching of wreath and veil—through the few moments of almost silent farewell to her father in the library, ere he led her out to the carriage.

That over, she went through the ceremony in the church with the composure that came from a confident love, and never bride looked fairer than she, as she passed between rows of school children and amid showers of blossoms back to the carriage with her husband. She had not been told of the welcome that awaited her at the lodge-gates, but when the loud cheers burst unexpectedly upon her ear, her calm gave way, and the ready tears came.

The horses were soon unharnessed,—for though it was considerably out of the usual course for the bride to be drawn in triumph to her door at this stage of the proceedings, Sir Duncan had not had the heart to refuse the request of those who had planned it. And Muriel, with tears and smiles, looked out at her friends, and one of them was sure he heard her say to Leslie, “Oh, there’s Jamie Paterson—looking so clean! How nice of him!” and was glad that he had paid that visit to the stores.

The breakfast, in spite of Miss Forbes’s fears, passed off excellently. Muriel did not appear, but partook of her own meal in the little boudoir, once her mother’s and hitherto her own; but before retiring there, she made the first cut in the monster cake, which, for size and richness, satisfied even Miss Forbes’s requirements. Then the travelling dress was on, mamsie put back the

veil for a last embrace, and Sir Duncan at the door was calling that the carriage was ready, and it was fully time to start.

Muriel went out : with a last lingering look round her pretty room, she took her father's arm in silence and hastened along the passage to the landing-place at the top of the main staircase. She had an indistinct consciousness of kisses and blessings, of a sea of upturned faces below her as she came down the wide staircase, of a rush, a bewildering pattering shower of shoes and rice, the carriage door slammed, and they were off — but even as the four grey horses moved, a figure dashed to the farther window and threw something into her lap with a cry of “Wussing ye joy, Mrs Leslie !” It was Jamie Paterson, and on Muriel's knee lay a dainty pair of bronze shoes with fanciful sewing and rosettes.

“Eh,” said Jamie, with a sigh, as he

joined his friends, “she’s a bonnie lass, and cheerin’s a fine thing.”

“Hoo’s that, Jamie?”

“Man, it’s sic drouthy wark. Let’s awa’ to the denner-tent.”

The bonfires blazed brightly that night on more than one hillside; and not one of those who piled them, and watched their rising flames, guessed that a solitary sentry from the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle gazed at the reddening sky, and thought that once—in a time that now seemed very far away—he too had loved the fair girl in whose honour that glow was kindled.

“I really think, Duncan, that everything has gone off without a single hitch or failure of any kind,” said Miss Alicia to her brother, two days after Muriel’s marriage, when the last dinner was over, the last cheer given, and the relics of the festivities were being cleared away.

"I can hardly believe that, my dear; we may be quite sure that some one or other has not been pleased, though we may never find it out. But I must say, every one has tried, as far as I could tell, to carry out the orders completely, and no failure has come to my knowledge."

"The Duchess said everything was charming."

"What! even in spite of the standing breakfast?" exclaimed Sir Duncan.

"Well, I confess people minded that less than I expected: they seemed amused, but not so much put out after all," replied Miss Forbes, candidly.

"Of course; give people credit for sense, take them a little into your confidence about a thing, and ten to one they will be on your side."

"In your case, Duncan, — but then you have the reputation of being a little

eccentric, and that helps you through many a difficulty.”

“I am thankful to hear it, and am willing to be credited with any amount of eccentricity, if in that way I can secure my liberty.”

“Yes — you don't care what people think; I do, and I was much pleased to find the Duchess was well amused.”

“The Duchess is a woman of the world, and always has the air of being satisfied with her hosts: that's the reason she is so popular. One must be always pleased or always critical. Either way one gets a reputation, and that is the great object of a woman's life,” said Sir Duncan, smiling; but Miss Forbes was not inclined to smile.

“Now you are talking riddles, Duncan, for you know you don't like the Duchess. But to return to what we were saying — you think things went off well?”

“Yes ; and it is satisfactory that I did not see a single face that was not kindly and well pleased in the crowd to-day. Every one has shown great sympathy and good feeling through the whole affair.”

“Particularly by taking too much whisky,” remarked Miss Alicia, who always shuddered at the sight of any one who had “had a drop.”

“You must not be too hard on that, for there were very few offenders, considering the number entertained. You know I abominate drink as heartily as you ; but until men value their self-respect more than many of them do, I fear drunkards will exist. I was particularly struck with the sobriety of the people compared with what I remember at the time of my own marriage, for instance.”

“I saw that horrible man Paterson, and that was enough for me.”

“Poor old Jamie ! When a man has

yielded for thirty years or more, you can hardly expect him to be hero enough to leave a feast sober. I think it spoke volumes for his kind feeling towards Muriel that he came sober and clean.”

“I believe you would find an excuse for the greatest criminal, Duncan !”

“Can you honestly say there would be none? I do not despise drink less because I see the force of the temptation.”

“Ah well! you cannot expect a woman to agree with all that. Our conclusions are more distinct.”

Sir Duncan smiled, but did not reply: he certainly did not expect this particular woman to agree with him, and willingly allowed the talk to return to the pleasant channels in which it had flowed at first. It did indeed seem as though nothing had occurred to overcast that brilliant wedding-day. From the rosy dawn to the firelit night everything had gone smoothly; and

just as smoothly, as far as onlookers could tell, the life of the young husband and wife might run.

Who would have thought that a tiny cloud, that was beginning to arise in the far East, would by-and-by overshadow it—a cloud that hung over a fort and a palace, where a sullen potentate was nursing disappointment and wrath?

CHAPTER XII.

FINDING HIS LEVEL.

GREAT as was the blank Muriel's departure had left at Inverallan Hall, she was almost more missed at the manse. Sir Duncan would see her again soon, could follow her in her wanderings if he chose, would receive almost daily her happy letters, but for "mamsie" there were no such consolations. When her heart was heavy and her eyes sore with weeping over her husband's stern avoidance of her boy's name; when she longed with a sick longing to see him again, or trembled at the inevitable parting when he must go abroad,—there was no sound of a cheery voice, no bright young

face peeping in at the window, no warm kiss to comfort her loneliness, now that Muriel was gone.

She began to feel old, old and weary ; and she would walk slowly of an afternoon to the little yew arbour at the end of the garden, from which she could see the friends of her youth, the distant Highland hills among which she had dreamed her earliest dreams. Here she would sit for hours, watching while the broad sunshine lit up masses of crag and wooded slope and heathery moor,—watching while the blue shadows gathered and the swift shower drifted across the peaks, or the evening colours deepened, and orange clouds barred the sky behind the purple crests. Then the minister would come to the door, calling imperiously as a man will who wants his tea and finds no woman in the accustomed corner ; and she would rise and return to the house, a little more quickly perhaps, as though she had

gathered strength in that time of quiet communing, and with a patient face she would pour out the tea, and bear her part in the talk of the hour.

Her patience smote her husband, for he knew that she suffered. He talked therefore of books and opinions that of old would have interested her, thinking to do what he could for her, and to persuade himself that no more was due from him, since he could not go back from his word about their son. And she listened and knew that she was thinking all the while of Ronald, and that her husband's dogmatism had been tried and found wanting when she needed help and comfort. Further, with the strange intuition that belongs to those that love, even though love be hidden for a while behind a cloud of misunderstanding or difference, each was aware of the other's state of mind, and knew of the mutual knowledge.

Life was a sore perplexity at the manse in these days, and as yet there was no sign of clearer understanding. Ronald had written to his mother soon after Sir Duncan had seen him in Edinburgh, and his letter brought her some comfort ; but though her husband had read it, and she, eagerly watching him, had seen the quickly restrained interest in his face, his words, as he returned it to her, crushed the hope that was rising in her heart.

“ He'll have to bow his proud spirit now. He'll find that liberty is not included amongst the pomps and glories of war.”

“ Perhaps that will be good for him ; but oh, James, you'll come and see him—our boy ? ” said the mother, pleadingly.

“ No, wife. I at least will not go back from my word. He was to me a chosen plant—we need not talk of that,—he has refused a great part in life, has turned his back wilfully on the work in which he

might have toiled for the right, and has given himself to a profession fit for godless idlers. It would not be fitting that I should visit him, unless, indeed, he repents of his choice. He is no longer as a son to me."

This had been the minister's decision, which no persuasions would induce him to alter; therefore his wife had ceased to argue, and in her long hours of solitude had determined to be, for once, more mother than wife, and to go and see her son by herself. But when she wrote to Ronald—innocent, poor soul, of the details of his life—to propose that he should meet her at the railway station, and spend the day with her, he answered by return of post, begging her not to come.

"If I happened to be on duty, I could not come to see you at all," he wrote, "and I am not used yet to my livery, and should not like to walk about the town with you, where, perhaps, we might meet

some of my father's friends. I am not ashamed of myself, understand, but I should be ashamed for you."

Little did he dream, when he penned this letter, that in a few short years he would be prouder of wearing that livery of the Queen's than he could have been of any other garb on earth.

At present he was only feeling the inevitable hardships of his position. He hated the daily drills, the monotonous duties which he could not yet discharge with mechanical indifference; he disliked the incessant inspection, and was sometimes bitterly amused, but more often angry, at the paramount importance of trifles. There were days when he could have burst into ironical laughter at the serious countenances of the officers as they inspected belts and buttons, detecting with severe eyes if a fold were misplaced, or a belt a quarter of an inch out of its place.

The barrack life, the constant contact with his companions, the rough meals, the lack of privacy, disgusted him, and many a time did he regret that he had rejected Sir Duncan's offer to buy him his discharge. The only possible ameliorations to his lot would be, first, to go abroad, and, secondly, to do his best to obtain promotion. He saw that the sergeants were, as a rule, far more polished and educated than he had expected, and he resolved that at the earliest possible date he would rank among them.

This resolve once taken, his will bent on learning his work, he soon attracted the attention of his superiors, and was marked as a man likely to get on. Happily for him, good non-commissioned officers were much wanted, and in six months he had his first stripe upon his arm.

Instantly he wrote to his mother, and fixed a day for her to come to Edinburgh.

“I have made my first upward step to-

day, mother, and now I should not care though all the folk you know were to meet us, since a man who does his best in any sort of work may fairly look any other man in the face. I have done mine, and as I get on, I believe I shall grow fond of my profession."

To Mrs Bennett much of this letter was unintelligible : to her one soldier was the same as another, and she could not understand the grades and their distinctions. Ronald, however, was contented, and that was enough for her, and she prepared gladly for her trip.

" James, I'm going to Edinburgh on Wednesday," said she that evening as they sat at tea.

" Are you ? Is that arranged ?" he asked.

" Yes, there's the letter. You can have no objection now—he is doing his best ; will you not come with me ?"

" He does not invite me, and I told you

before that I would not do it. Go yourself. I cannot expect more fortitude from you. Go, and—wife—see if he wants for anything. It would be right to do what we can for the lad now, in the way of any small sum.”

“Thank you, James,” replied Marian, grateful for this first sign of softening, and hopeful that it might be the precursor of a gentler mood.

As the train on Wednesday morning drew up at the platform, Mrs Bennet looked out eagerly : a tall figure in tartan and white jacket came quickly forward, and with a rush of mingled feelings she recognised her son. He was greatly changed in appearance, he had grown and improved in looks ; drill and discipline had set him up, and transformed him from a boy to a man. So far she could not but be pleased and proud of him, but it was hard to reconcile herself to the uniform, which was to her a badge of restraint and of banishment from home.

It seemed to her a dreadful thing that he should have no room of his own into which he could take her for a quiet talk. She must either go to the expense of hiring a sitting-room at a hotel, or content herself with such privacy as was afforded by a corner table in one of the confectioners' dining-rooms. She chose the latter, for as it was still early there would be but few people, and she went, with a certain shy consciousness upon her, to one that she was accustomed to frequent on the rare occasions when Mr Bennet had brought her to town.

As she entered the shop, and was passing through to the dining-room, the girls behind the counter looked up at Ronald, and after a moment's hesitation one of them came forward.

"I think you've made a mistake," she said; "we don't usually have soldiers in here."

Ronald flushed scarlet, and stood for a

second, too much taken aback to reply; but his mother turned round.

“I think *you* are making a mistake. I have been here often before—I am Mrs Bennett.”

“Oh yes, ma’am, I remember you.”

“This is my son,” said Marian, with the dignity of a woman who defends the man who belongs to her, even though her pride be hurt.

“Oh, indeed,” said the girl, half supercilious, half embarrassed; “of course I didn’t know, ma’am,—it’s not that we object, but there’s many people mightn’t like it.”

“I presume if a soldier behaves like a gentleman they cannot object,” said Ronald, recovering himself; “you can hardly select your customers. Let us go on, mother.”

“Well, ma’am, if anything’s said it will not be my fault,—I’ve no wish to disoblige,” said the girl; and mother and son went into the dining-room, and took their places

at a table in the farthest corner of the room.

Mrs Bennett was trembling as she sat down : her quick temper was fired, her sensitive pride stung, by this harsh evidence of her boy's social fall. There flashed upon her mind a day, one of many, when she had watched him sleeping in his crib, and, looking at his broad brow and well-shaped head, had indulged in dreams of some great future in store for him. She had dreamt of him as a scholar, an author, perhaps a great preacher, and here he sat before her in a uniform that exposed him to insult.

Mother-like she bent forward to comfort him, laying her thin hand on his. "My boy, how well you look ! do not let that woman's stupidity vex you."

"On the contrary, it is giving me new ideas, mother. If folk are really so illiberal as to dislike a uniform that has been worn by men quite as good as they, it's time to

take the matter up, and force them to respect it."

"But, my dear, soldiers are so often rough and unpleasant."

"Of course, the good suffer for the bad—that is to be expected. But I think I'll make an experiment; I'll lunch at all the dining-rooms in Edinburgh, and publish the result. Now let us talk of other matters, and not waste our precious time together. Tell me about Mrs Leslie's marriage."

"I sent you a paper — did you not get it?"

"Oh yes, but I want to know all that you can tell me, and that the paper can't tell."

Mrs Bennett proceeded to comply with his request, and then passed on to the topics most interesting to her: Ronald's reasons for his flight, what he had done with himself at first, why he had enlisted, and a hundred other matters on which she had touched but lightly, if at all, in her letters.

While they conversed in low tones, the room began to fill, and one and another of the new comers looked with disapproval at the unaccustomed visitor in the corner. Two ladies hesitated to take the next table, which was the only one vacant, saying audibly something about a smell of smoke.

Mrs Bennett, who had seen their manoeuvre, hoped that Ronald would not notice the remark, but his quick ear caught it, and rising, he said at once, with a bow, "Excuse me ; I assure you I do not smoke," but at the same time he drew his chair a little farther away.

The elder of the two ladies looked annoyed ; but they took their places, nevertheless, and ordered their luncheon.

"If you have finished, ma'am, we should be glad of the table," said the waitress to Mrs Bennett, shortly afterwards.

"Ah yes, we are keeping it too long," replied Ronald, rising and paying for the

luncheon. As he moved the chairs, and stood back to allow his mother to pass, he felt that every one was watching him ; and he was walking out of the room with head erect, when a lady and gentleman entered, and there was a momentary pause, as a waitress, tray in hand, barred the way.

The gentleman—a stout man in a light suit—looked at Ronald, hesitated, looked again, and spoke.

“Surely I know your face—met you somewhere.”

“Yes, in different clothes, skating on Airthrey Loch.”

“To be sure : Mr Bennett, I think ; I never forget a face ; heard you’d enlisted,” said Mr Hardwicke, shaking hands with Ronald, and glancing at Mrs Bennett.

“My mother, Mr Hardwicke,” said Ronald.

“My sister, Mr Bennett ; she’s just home from school—hardly knows Tillybodle,” re-

turned Hardwicke. "Have you had lunch? Pity—might have had it together. How d'ye like the service?"

"It's not as bad as it's painted," replied Ronald, smiling.

"Ah—wish I was in it—wanted to go in—guardians wouldn't let me—might have done some good *then*. Are you staying in Edinburgh, Mrs Bennett?"

"Only for the day. I came to see my son."

"My carriage is at the door; couldn't it take you anywhere? pray use it."

"We shall be some time at lunch—Ernest likes to lunch well," added Miss Hardwicke, smiling.

"Of course—something to do. Where will you go, Mrs Bennett?"

"Mrs Bennett was about to decline, but Ronald interposed. "You are very kind, indeed, and I know my mother is tired. I shall be very glad if she can go to the National Gallery."

“Certainly—come along—I’ll put you in. Laura, get the carte, and choose the soup—not the rest, though.”

So saying, Mr Hardwicke escorted Mrs Bennett down-stairs, and, to the amazement of the shop girls, she and her son drove off in a neat brougham.

“Well, that’s a good fellow,” said Ronald, “and I remember I thought him an ass. No wonder; I was too great an ass myself then to do otherwise.”

“I never heard of these people before,” said his sister to Hardwicke, as he sat down and began to study the carte; “you seem very friendly with them: just a private soldier, isn’t he?”

“Yes, you have heard of them. The old lady is the wife of the Tillybodle minister. Son ran away from home, and enlisted. I barely know him—heard all about him—sorry for his old mother; sorry for him, for he is another of them.”

“Another of whom?”

“Another of *us*—men who loved Muriel Forbes—only it wrecked him and saved me,—that’s the difference.”

“Ernest, that sounds as if you had been something dreadful. I wish you wouldn’t speak so.”

“So I was—dreadful ass—am an ass still, but I know it—that’s different; mean to try and help other asses—another difference; and *she* did it. Will you have sperlings? they may be good. Lobster can’t be eatable here!”

“Well,” said the head waitress, meanwhile, as she paused to speak to her companions in the shop, “Mrs Bennett may be all right—and Mr Hardwicke’s quite the gentleman; but if Mr Bennett comes here again, I’ll get the manager in, for there’s five different parties spoke about him to-day.”

So true it is that the fickle British public will cheer itself hoarse one day over a

departing or an incoming regiment, and will turn the cold shoulder the next on individuals whose uniform ought to be their pride.

In the quiet rooms of the gallery, with only lovely Mrs Graham's eyes gazing at them from the canvas, mother and son resumed their interrupted talk ; and there, as gently as he could, he told her that in a few months he must sail for India to join the head-quarters of his regiment, and tried to make her comprehend that he could not by any possibility remain with the linked battalion in the castle.

True remorse for his mad act had never smitten Ronald till he saw his mother cowering down on the crimson ottoman beside him, as though shrinking from some mortal blow. She hid her face so long in her hands, that at last, alarmed at her silence, he touched her, and whispered a loving word in her ear.

She looked up at him, her face blanched, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

“Ronald, if you go abroad, it will kill me!”

“Mother, you taught me to love honour, did you not?”

“Yes—well?”

“Well, you know my only honour now is in going on well with my profession; and you surely know, too, that I cannot leave it. Would you like your father's grandson—a MacGregor's grandson—to be caught as a deserter? or would you prefer to have him branded as a coward? They are the only alternatives.”

“Why as a coward?”

“Because there is a rumour of war, and, therefore, I could not, even if I wished it, take my discharge now. No, mother, you must not be less brave than your forbears.”

This was an argument that appealed to Marian Bennett's heart; but though she

acknowledged its force, she raised herself wearily and shook her head.

“To endure, to endure, and always to endure. That’s the owre-word of some women’s lives—it has been so with me!”

“And what says our old proverb, mother? —‘He that tholes owrecomes.’”

“Ay, laddie, it’s easy talking: men’s work eases their troubles, but a woman’s griefs are about her day and night. Well, well, I’ll do my best; and mind you this, laddie,—I can bear trials that come in the natural course of life, but what I could not bear would be to know you were unworthy.”

“Mother,” said Ronald, bravely, “I hope I may never cause you another heartache by anything I do. I’ve had my schooling and my paiks,” he continued, more lightly, “but I mean to be a gude bairn henceforth: believe that, and let me think it’s some comfort to you.”

“The best you could give me, my dear bairn,” said Mrs Bennett, with shining eyes.

“That’s well ; and now I fear you must be going, or you’ll miss your train,” said he. And leaning on her boy’s arm, Mrs Bennett walked along Princes Street, crowded at that hour, to the Waverley Station, and did not even reflect that her old friends might chance to meet her, and might look askance at her on his account.

Had they done so, she would have regarded them with pride as great as their own ; for Ronald was more hers to-day than he had been for years. He had spoken freely to her, and she was content.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FRESH START.

WHEN Mrs Bennett reached home her husband was waiting at the door of his study, and followed her into the parlour, poking the fire restlessly, while the old maid-servant, anxious to see to her mistress's comfort after her unwonted absence, lingered about her, putting a chair for her near the hearth.

She was anxious too, old Nancy, for she knew what errand had taken Mrs Bennett away ; but she would not utter the question that was on her lips, because the minister was by. For the same reason Mrs Bennett only gave her a nod and a

smile—a faint and wan smile—and said, “I’d like a cup of tea, Nancy—I’m tired;” whereupon Nancy left the room, thinking within herself that that weary voice could have no good news to tell.

There was silence when husband and wife were left alone,—she sitting on a low seat, her listless hands on her knees, her sad eyes fixed on the blazing coals; he standing, a dark figure against the ruddy light, with sidelong glance at her drooping head, and heart too proud to question her.

At last he spoke, in a tone sharpened by anxious impatience—“Well, wife?”

She raised herself, and looking him straight in the face said slowly, “Ronald is well. He will get on. He—goes to India—in about six months.”

“What do you say? How? The 1st is quartered in Edinburgh.”

“The 1st is not his regiment, you must

remember ; he joins the 2d Regiment with the next draft."

Bennett walked to the window and drummed with his fingers on the panes, each sound going sharply through his wife's aching head.

"Did he ask for me—or wish—to see me?" he inquired, without turning round.

"He said he supposed you had not wished to see him ; you were always stern to him, and he was neither clever enough nor good enough to satisfy you. He said it had often seemed to him he had no father ; he knew that you never loved him as I did."

These sentences were uttered in a monotonous tone, as though the speaker did not expect them to produce any effect, and was merely answering mechanically the questions that had been put to her.

Again there was a pause, till on her startled ear broke a sigh that was almost

a sob, and a smothered exclamation, "My boy—my boy!"

She turned and looked, and in the fading light she saw her husband leaning his head on his clasped hands against the window, and her heart leapt.

Was it only by losing her boy that she was to find again the loving companion of her youth? Would the stern nature unbend at last, so that he and she might comfort each other in their lonely old age? She rose, leaning for support upon a chair, half fearing a rebuff, half awed by Bennett's unwonted attitude.

"James!" she said, timidly; and again, "James!"

Bennett did not speak; but he stretched out his hand in mute appeal, and she tottered rather than walked across the room, and flung her arms round his neck, drawing towards her the still hidden face.

"Husband!"—she had not so addressed

him for months—"come to the fireside and let us talk together. Let me see into your mind as I did when we were young—and oh, let there be peace between us!"

So with tears and gentle force she led him to her own arm-chair, and sitting by him, laid her hand in his and drew him on to speak.

To that outpouring of the secrets of a reserved nature no stranger ear should listen. Now and again such a character crosses our path, and we recognise with pity the coldness that covers inward fire, the harshness and reserve that hide such agonies of self-immolation, such strivings after the fulfilment of duty, as are unknown to happier souls.

Marion Bennett had never known her husband as thoroughly as now, when the pang of hearing his son's words had stirred him. He was wounded to the quick in his tenderest point; for he had failed—failed

utterly in duty and in attaining the ends for which he had schooled himself as well as his son, since the lad had found only lack of human love where he had intended him to find love of the right. And now, if he had been mistaken, it was too late to amend. The boy was boy no longer, and in a few short months would be banished to a distant land where he would be surrounded with temptations of the kind his father most dreaded.

“Not too late ;” his wife’s imploring face is lifted to his, and she says gently, tenderly, “If Ronald could come—would you wish it, would it be anything of a comfort to you ?”

“It would indeed ; but it cannot be.”

“It can, and it shall. He can get leave—furlough for a fortnight, perhaps more. He wanted to come” . . . she stopped abruptly.

“And feared I did not wish it—was that it ?”

She stroked his hand for all reply ; adding presently, "Write to him yourself, James, will you ? tell him to come—the poor boy."

"I will, wife, before I rest this night. Poor wife ! you have suffered—we must comfort each other."

Nancy had come to the door with the tray, but had wisely retired. And now, when the minister rang for candles, she was, as she expressed it, fair dumfounded at the change on the face o' the mistress. But the new light in the dim eyes, and the alert movements of the tall figure, were explained when Mrs Bennett whispered to her that night, "Nancy, Master Ronald is coming home to see us."

Mr Bennett's letter to his son was brief, and from another parent would have seemed cold. But Ronald would have detected a difference in its tone, even without his mother's hasty note of explanation and

entreaty that he would believe himself mistaken, and try and feel more kindly to his father.

“You and he are alike,” she wrote; “why is it that you cannot understand each other better?”

There was truth in this, as Ronald felt; and as he lay awake on his hard pallet-bed, and thought over his father's devotion to his work, and the patient training he had bestowed upon him in the confident hope that he too would follow on the same path, he realised more fully than before the bitterness of the disappointment he had caused.

It had needed but a kindly word on Bennett's part to touch the better nature in the lad, already roused by his mother's visit, and the sight of her regret at the prospect before him; and he answered his father's note almost affectionately. He would come now, or later, whichever should

seem best ; but if now, he might not be able to get away again before sailing for India : would it be best to wait till nearer that time ?

The mother—hungering for his presence—could not defer the happiness so newly promised to her ; and Bennett was anxious to see his son quickly and clear away, if it might be, the painful impressions he had expressed regarding him, and therefore a second letter begged him to come as soon as he could obtain his furlough, and for as long a time as could be granted to him.

It was with a curious mixture of feelings that Ronald took his place in the train that was to bear him home. Hitherto it had seemed as though he had lived two lives, separated from each other by a trenchant line,—a line drawn at the hour he surrendered himself to the recruiting-sergeant. Up to that hour he had not cast away irretrievably his old self. Though he

had left his home, there was the possibility of return still open to him, however little he had intended to avail himself of it; but since then he had been bound without escape to new habits, new companions, and new ideas, and had been tried by quite new standards of excellence. Now he was going to make, as it were, a tie and link between the new life and the old; and it was not without a certain subdued excitement that he contemplated returning with such a purpose to the place and the faces that had so long been familiar to him.

He thought, perhaps, less of the probable reconciliation with his father than his mother at least would have wished or expected. It was part of the condition of things that Mr Bennett had prepared for himself that his son had become independent of him. Ten years ago, as a boy full of ambition and hot impulse, Ronald would have yielded himself eagerly to the

influence of a parent who had shown him sympathy, as well as given him advice. But the sympathy was never forthcoming, the advice was couched in harsh and forbidding phrases, and, thrown back upon himself, he learned to stand alone; so that now, when his father yearned for something like friendship with him, he had nothing better than courtesy to offer.

His arrival created a little excitement in the village, where a uniform was rarely or never seen. As he came along the road that for the last half-mile ran straight, past low shops and thatched cottages, towards the manse, some of the bairns eating their "pieces" at the doors saw him. They watched him for a while with curiosity, not recognising at first what the white-coated figure might be as it passed quickly from sunshine to shadow under each succeeding tree.

"What'll it be, Jeannie?" asked a wee

thing, letting the jelly drop unheeded on her pinafore as she gazed.

"I dinna ken," replied the elder girl, gravely; then as a brilliant idea flashed upon her, she exclaimed, "It's like yon man in white—the clown they ca'd him—that cam aince wi' a travellin' van. Ye canna mind o' that, Meg," she added, with pride in her longer experience.

"Eh! *ye* dinna ken mickle, Jeannie M'Kenzie. Yon's jist a sodger," said a boy, coming up; and instantly the two lassies ran in to their respective homes with the cry, "Mither! there's a sodger comin' doon the road."

"A sodger!" cried Jamie Paterson, jumping up and coming out to his door; "whaur is he?"

Pushing his spectacles up on his brow, and shading his eyes with his hands, he peered at the advancing figure. "Ay, ay; it's him, sure eneuch, and a gude-lookin' lad he is."

“Wha, Jamie? wha is’t?”

“Hoot! did ye no hear it’s Ronald Bennett? Nancy tell’t me he was comin’.”

“Eh my!” “Losh!” and other exclamations, testified to the general astonishment, and several gazers were assembled by the time Ronald was near the first house.

Looking up to Paterson’s doorway, he observed the bent figure in the leather apron, and took off his cap—a greeting to which Jamie eagerly responded. But Ronald did not intend to pause among his old acquaintances before he had entered the manse, and turned off by a short cut which took him behind the houses to the back gate.

“Ay, he’s awa’ hame—richt eneuch; we’ll see him in a whilie,” said Jamie, and returned to his bench, while the loiterers gradually dispersed.

Mrs Bennett was at the window watching the path to the garden-gate, and was taken by surprise when Ronald came round

the corner of the house suddenly upon her. He was in the little passage before she could reach the door, and even as she threw her arms round him, she observed afresh that he was taller and broader than when he left home—together a different figure from the long-limbed lad whose awkward gait had often vexed her motherly pride.

Nancy was at hand for her share of greeting; and that over, Ronald went into the sitting-room, and almost started at the sound of repressed emotion in his father's voice as he said, laying a hand on his shoulder—

“My son, I am glad to see you again at home!”

“Thank you, father,” replied Ronald, with a strong clasp of the hand; and then Mrs Bennett pushed him gently into her own chair, and fondled and rejoiced over him, talking confusedly the while, in her excitement, of the dinner that she and Nancy had prepared.

“In fact, mother,” said he, addressing her, but looking at his father, “you are slaying the fatted calf, are you not, for the prodigal son?”

She did not answer, but turned also to her husband, as though the appeal should be replied to by him.

“Ronald,” he said, with a slight effort, “there are words that had better be said at once. It appears to me, my boy, that there has been, I may say, a lifelong misunderstanding between us. I judge by your own words to your mother.”

“I said no more to her than I have always felt, sir,” replied Ronald, using unconsciously the mode of address to which he was now accustomed. His father noticed the little word, and felt it to be a sort of tacit acknowledgment such as he had never received before from his impatient boy.

“Being your father, the fault must have been in some degree mine, but not entirely.

I cannot admit that your behaviour has been justified."

"I could not expect you to admit it, sir. I am only too well aware of my own folly, not in declining to enter the Kirk, but in running away and rejecting help. I was mad, I think."

A kindly touch on his shoulder expressed Mrs Bennett's sympathy; she guessed in what disappointed love that folly and madness had originated, and, womanlike, pitied rather than blamed him.

Bennett once more held out his hand. "That being so, let bygones be bygones, and let us strive to make the future as fair as may be. You know I dislike the profession you have chosen, but I would have you do your duty in it. Perhaps you may enable me to think better of it," said he, with a somewhat melancholy smile.

"I hope I may, father. I hated it myself at first, being, as you know, somewhat

averse to discipline ; but I have begun to take a pride in it, and—who knows ?—I may win honours some day. I feel as if things must go better with me, now that they are right here.” Voice and eye said more than the mere words in this speech ; and whatever might be the difference of tastes and opinions, there were at least peace and goodwill under the roof of the manse that day.

It was not long before Ronald found his way to the shoemaker’s little shop, where Jamie, looking at him with kindly eyes, spoke curtly, as is the way with the canny Scot when his heart is touched.

“There’s mair o’ you come hame than gaed awa’, there’s nae denyin’ that,” said he.

“Yes ; so it seems. Every one says I’ve grown, Jamie, as though I were a bit laddie home from school.”

“Humph ! That’s jist what ye are, I’m thinking, neither mair nor less ; ye’ve had yere palmies, nae doobt, in the shape o’ het

words and maybe a wheen extry drills—eh?”

“You’re no far wrong, Jamie,” said Ronald, greatly amused, but also a trifle nettled at his reception.

“It’s a braw coat, though; and they say pride disna feel pain,” continued Jamie. “I had a fancy for it mysel when I was a lad-die; but eh, I couldna thole the life,—attention here and attention there, and touch your cap to this yane and that yane: my certie! I’d raither turn cadger than sodger, for a’ the braws and the music and the crowds rinnin’ after ye! There’s mair sound nor sense aboot it, to my idea.”

“Well, Jamie, since my coat pleases you so little, maybe ye’d prefer my room to my company,” said Ronald, rising.

“Hoot, man! sit doon, and dinna fash yoursel. D’ye no ken my bark’s waur nor my bite? I’d jist like to be sure, if it’s no speirin’ owre mickle—I’d like to be satis-

feed that it wasna ony o' my havers that helpit ye to turn sodger?"

"Not a bit—not a word that you said helped me, Jamie; it was just my own confounded wrong-headedness that drove me to it. But why? were you vexed about it?"

"Ou ay! naething by ordinar'; but hoot! it's nae guid tellin' lees when naething's to come o't. Ay, laddie, I was sair doonhairted when ye gaed awa' in yon wud kind o' a way; and I'd hae been awfu' pit about if I'd thocht that ony hairm had come o' oor cracks thegither. Mistress Bennett was that changed—her that used to be as straught as a birk, gaed up the street wi' her heid bood and her feet scrapin' like an auld, auld woman; and I wadna like to hae had a han' in it, ye see."

"Never fear, Jamie; it's all my doing—none of yours," said Ronald sadly, for the graphic description touched him. "But,"

he added, brightening, "I hope you'll see her looking more like her old self again now. My father and I have made it up, Jamie, and I mean to do well yet in spite of the red coat that you despise."

"Na, na ; yon's no a word for a body like me : there's a kind o' a moral soun' aboot it, and there's naebody can say auld Jamie Paterson wes sae doom's sure o' his ain morals that he culd be owre perjinkity aboot his neebor's. Let that flee stick to the wa', as Rab Roy says."

The grave air with which the shoemaker uttered this speech moved Ronald to laughter, and presently the two were talking as unrestrainedly as in old days ; and the conversation must have been gratifying to Jamie, for when his visitor rose to go, he dropped his work on to his knee, and held out a grimy hand.

"Weel, ye'll come back,—ye'll aye find me here. I've turned real hard-working this

while back, and there's a heap o' siller in the auld kist yonder. I was thinkin' o' pit-tin' it in the bank ; but I'm amaist afeared I'd no ken mysel. It wad be a terrible thing if I heard the folk say that auld Jamie had turned respectable ! ”

There was a pawkie twinkle in the old man's eye as he spoke, and Ronald hardly knew how much truth there might be in his statement ; but on inquiry he found that a wonderful amount of business had been done of late in the little shop, and that some of Paterson's cronies had been heard to complain that there was no good in going down there now, for that old Jamie was “ as quiet as a cock that durstn't crawl.” What was it that had wrought the change ? No one could answer that question, but it was just after Miss Muriel's wedding that he had begun to work.

By-and-by Ronald ventured to ask Jamie himself what had induced him to alter his

mode of life, but he only received an evasive answer.

It was on a certain Sabbath afternoon that, having strolled towards the hill, Ronald spied Jamie smoking a pipe at the bridge-end, with two or three companions. Joining the group, he found himself soon left alone with the shoemaker, whom he gradually led on to talk of what had happened in the village during the last few months, and of the festivities at Muriel's marriage. It was clear that some hidden thought gave a special interest to Jamie's account of that time, and at last it found expression.

After describing his own efforts to honour the bride, and the bonny smile she gied him as she passed, he continued, "An' she wrote to me hersel to thank me for the bit slippers I made till her,—a wee bit notie on tented paper, and sic a canty freendly way she has o' sayin' a thing,—I hae it yet."

Here he paused, either to invite a question, or from some hesitation.

“What did she say?” asked Ronald, curious and interested.

“Weel, she askit me as a sort o’ kindness to her and her faither, if I wud try to keep frae whusky for sax months, and let her see me when she comes back, what she ca’s a self-respectin’ man; and she sent me a bit poetry. A queer kind o’ language it’s written in, but I made it oot, and it sort o’ shamed me. The ‘Northern Cobbler’ they ca’d it. An’ that’s the way I’ve dune sic a lot o’ work this while back. I’m no gaun to bind mysel to ony temperance pledges, or mak ony promises. I’ll keep my leeberty, and tak my glaiss when I wull; but I jist thocht I micht try an experiment like. I wadna be onceevil to yon lassie, for she’s aye been ceevil to me.”

“I think pledges are crutches for cripples at their best,” said Ronald; “but you

could not well refuse to do what she asks you."

"That's it. It wadna be weel-bred no to try," replied Jamie, who, beneath his rough ways, had very decided views as to conduct, and especially as to the kind of behaviour which in his eyes constituted a gentleman. Muriel's tact had recognised this hidden point in his character, and treating him with the courtesy of a high-bred lady, she had obtained an ascendancy over him that she herself was far from suspecting, and that no one else had ever succeeded in winning.

Even Ronald was surprised at its extent. He had been both too boyish and too self-occupied to observe the ready politeness with which Paterson would rise and touch his cap to Muriel as any of her equals might have done—an amount of courtesy he did not bestow on any one else. Neither had he discovered that the old man cherished a

warm respect and liking for the fair girl, whose face, as Mrs Bennett used to say, was as welcome as summer in every house that she frequented.

As he bade Jamie good night, and sauntered homeward, he thought over the conversation that had passed with something like shame. For the sake of a kind word and note, Jamie Paterson was making a struggle against the idle and unsteady habits which had mastered him for years; and though there was little hope of his success, the effort deserved respect. He had acknowledged Muriel's influence as it deserved to be acknowledged, and in doing so he had done her true honour; while Ronald himself, with as many advantages on his side as Jamie had had difficulties on his, had allowed himself to indulge in a mad passion which had overcome his brain, and deadened his heart to duty and right.

His cheek burned with hot self-reproach

as he reflected that he had played but a cowardly part throughout, and acknowledging humbly that he had proved himself unfit for any better post, he strengthened his resolve to do his utmost in the profession he had chosen. Though he did not know it, there was therefore every prospect of success for him, since self-knowledge and self-mastery are the first steps on the ladder of achievement—steps that can neither be overleapt nor trodden with uncertain feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

EASTWARD HO !

THE time of Ronald's furlough passed away only too quickly, but the heavy air of depression that had hung about the manse passed away with it. Mrs Bennett, as he had prophesied, no longer "scraped" her feet along the village footpath, but held her head erect, and exchanged a cheerful good-day with the cottagers' wives. Nancy no longer slunk home in silence from her marketings, ashamed to face the inquiries and comments of her friends, but stopped for a chat as of old ; and it was even remarked that the minister's sermons breathed less of terror and more of peace.

Ronald therefore might take his departure with a lighter heart, and, if possible, with a deeper affection for the home which, since he was no longer a resident under its roof, had become to him something of a sacred place.

His mother, though she had longed to question him as to his feeling for Muriel, had not ventured to do so, some indefinable warning in voice or face checking her if she approached too near the forbidden subject; but she saw with satisfaction that whether he had conquered or forgotten his love for her, he was at least able to speak of her as an old friend might speak.

Sir Duncan was at Ardenshaugh until within two days of the expiry of Ronald's leave, but came immediately after his return to see him, and to give Mrs Bennett the latest news of Muriel's happy life. He, too, observed that Ronald bore himself well during this part of the conversation, joining in

it, and even, with a hardly perceptible effort, mentioning Mrs Leslie by name. He was glad that it should be so—glad that this lad, whom he had always liked, had been able to overcome a love that was as incongruous as it was romantic ; and he, too, augured well for his future.

“Come up and see me to-morrow, Ronald,” said he ; “come to lunch—at the usual hour.”

“Thanks, Sir Duncan—I would rather not,” replied Ronald, quietly.

“Why ?—ah, it is your last day with your mother,” replied Sir Duncan, glancing from him to Mrs Bennett.

“It is, but that is not my reason.”

“What is it, then ?”

“A foolish one perhaps,—but I cannot feel it so. When I am a colour-sergeant, Sir Duncan—that’s to say, when I have risen as high as I can rise—if you choose to ask me, I shall gladly come. At present I

should feel ashamed of my uniform, not for its own sake—I don't mean that—but ashamed of myself for wearing it."

"Well, I can understand that to a certain extent, though you know I think her Majesty's uniform an honourable dress."

"So do I, Sir Duncan. Every soldier should think so. But I don't think I am wrong in saying that this grade of it is not what I should be proud of wearing."

"No, you are right enough there. Well, I am sorry not to see you again, but the feeling is natural. All I can say is, the sooner I see the colours on your sleeve the better pleased I shall be, and you won't be too proud to sit at my table then. Good-bye, my boy!"

"Good-bye, Sir Duncan, and thank you," said Ronald; "I don't think you blame my pride."

"No, I don't know that I do," said Sir Duncan, smiling; and turning to Mrs Ben-

nett, he promised to come and see her oftener, as he would be at home for the present, after Ronald should have gone. "You will want cheering up again when you are alone."

"Yes, I shall—but less than before, Sir Duncan, for my boy is not unhappy, and there is no discord now at our hearth."

Thus the mother's love was prepared to take comfort even in sorrow and loneliness, since the boy's eyes were brighter, and the father's mind at rest.

While Ronald was still in Edinburgh, Captain Leslie's leave expired, and it became necessary for him and his bride to start for India, where his regiment was stationed. With money at command, they could afford to travel in comfort, and had no need to submit to the ordeal of a voyage on board a troopship. They sailed, therefore, by P. & O., arranging to spend a few days at Malta on the way.

Muriel enjoyed her halt at the bright little town of Valetta, and spent her time in rambling about, and in making purchases of lace and silver. She and her husband were walking about the castle, where huge circular stones mark the mouth of the vault in which grain is or ought to be stored against the contingency of a siege, when, looking out to sea, they observed a white-painted bulky trooper entering the harbour.

“By Jove, there’s the Euphrates!” said Leslie; “I must go on board, and get Harry Hammond to come and dine with us. I believe there’s a draft of the 2d Highlanders too. Perhaps your friend Bennett may be among them.”

“Oh, Frank, do you think so? Couldn’t we see him? I should like to do so if I can.”

“Privates don’t go on shore as a rule, but perhaps it might be managed. I can’t ask him to dine with Hammond, though—that would never do.”

“He can come and have afternoon tea, then — there would surely be no harm in that.”

“I will see; I do not know that he is there, I only thought he might be. Do you go home, dear, and I will run down to the ship.”

Ronald was on board, and as an especial favour to Major Hammond and his friend Captain Leslie, he was permitted to go on shore for a couple of hours. He was taken completely by surprise, for he had no idea that the Leslies were at Malta, but the invitation gave him keen pleasure, proving, as it did, that Muriel's friendly feelings had not been diminished by her marriage, nor, which he had thought more probable, by that rash letter which Mrs Simpson had so long concealed. To the surprise of his comrades, he stepped into one of the little green boats that crowded round the ship, with Captain Leslie and his companion,

carefully taking his place on the farthest bench, and not speaking unless addressed.

On landing, Leslie directed him to the hotel, and turned with his friend into a *café*. He was pleased with Ronald's good taste, and his ready acceptance of his position, but he judged that both he and Muriel would be more at their ease if they were to meet unobserved by a stranger.

Ronald could not see her unmoved, yet the feeling that quickened his pulse, as he entered the room, was very unlike the engrossing and overmastering passion that had shaken him when they parted some eighteen months ago. He was able now to look her in the face, and speak to her with as much calmness and self-possession as she herself showed.

"I am so glad to see you, Ronald."

"How very good of you to let me come, Mrs Leslie !"

Nothing could be more natural and easy

than the salutation on both sides, and Muriel, greatly relieved to see that the moody, anxious expression she remembered had given place to a look of quiet purpose, fell at once, and with evident pleasure, into her usual chat about home and friends.

The time passed quickly, and as Ronald looked round the cool, spacious room, he gave a sigh of relief. "How delightful this is after the trooper. Our accommodation there is somewhat of the scantiest."

"Yes, how dreadful it must be," replied Muriel, with sympathy in her tones.

"Oh, not so bad as that ; and after all, it is only for thirty days. There are plenty of good fellows among the men, and it is only the nights that are really very disagreeable."

"At least, you mean to make the best of it, I can see that."

"I hope so ; and I am looking forward to the novelty of Indian life."

"So am I," said Muriel, and Ronald

smiled, and thought how differently that Indian life would appear to him and to her: he had read enough to know, though he spoke cheerfully, that the soldier experiences all the discomforts, and tastes few or none of the pleasures, of existence in Hindustan.

Leslie and Hammond came in before very long, and now Ronald allowed himself to drop the soldier and talk as a guest. Leslie chatted for a while of the places to which they were bound, and his friend joined in the conversation, though with a sense of the oddness of the position, as he recalled to mind certain phrases that had escaped him a night or two before, when Corporal Bennett had come under his displeasure.

Ronald had no wish to outstay his welcome, and feeling that the great object of his visit was attained, he soon rose and took his leave.

"You need not go yet," said Leslie, glancing at the clock.

"No, but I should like to see something of the town as I have the opportunity, thanks to you and Mrs Leslie, so I think I will say good-bye."

"Good-bye, Ronald ; I shall write to your mother to-night," said Muriel.

"Thank you—she will know how I have enjoyed this visit," said he.

"A pleasant looking fellow," remarked Hammond, afterwards. "I wonder if he remembers how I rated him, when we were in the bay. A lot of us were sea-sick, and our tempers were short enough that night."

"He's improved,—the service has done him a world of good," replied Leslie, and his wife did not dissent.

The 2d Highlanders were quartered in the very popular little station of Hubblepore, and Ronald welcomed with relief the first sight of the tall, red brick barracks that

were to be their abode. Anything, however, would have been a pleasant change after their experience of days passed in a troop-train, where they were shunted for long hours into sidings, baked by the midday sun, choked with the fine red dust that covered every corner of the carriages, and landed at night in desolate-looking rest-camps, where the empty tents and sun-dried soil gave little promise of comfort or repose.

Hubblepore was a favourite station with officers and ladies, and, in a less degree, with the men also. There were mango topes and spreading banyan trees in the vicinity of the barracks, where shade was to be found on a hot evening; there were *jheels*, or swamps, where those who could buy or borrow a gun might shoot snipe and wild duck. Hares and quail were to be picked up now and again by the lucky sportsman, while for others there were pursuits of different kinds.

Men who had been in the hills had made collections of butterflies, and some endeavoured to fill up their boxes with beetles and insects. The few who cared to read found a fair library in the regiment, and for the many to whom graver pursuits were distasteful there were sundry amusements, including weekly sports which, though poor enough in themselves, varied the monotony of the long days.

Tug of war was then in full swing, races of every kind took place, and the native cavalry would enliven the scene with an exhibition of tent-pegging and lemon-cutting ; or the ladies and gentlemen who came in the course of their evening ride to see the fun, would finish the performance by riding over the "cavalry jumps."

It was a pretty sight to see the varied crowd that gathered on these occasions,—the English soldiers in their hot weather attire of spotless white ; the native cavalry in their

dark tunics and handsome blue turbans; the ladies—many of them first-rate horsewomen—sitting their pretty arabs to perfection, while those who did not aspire to ride stepped out of their carriages in the freshest and coolest of summer costumes, and smiled and flirted over their ices as though the thermometer had not been standing indoors at 97° a few hours ago, and mosquitoes and other insect plagues were unknown.

Ronald took a vigorous share in the games, where his active habits stood him in good stead, but it was in the cold weather that he found occupation most readily.

The men of the 2d were great in theatricals, and they soon discovered that no one among them could speak as well, or act as easily, as Corporal Bennett. To him, therefore, was always assigned the part of the principal gentleman, lover, king, or states-

man, and so well did he please the not very critical audience that he was by-and-by asked to fill a chance vacancy when the officers and ladies of the station began a series of entertainments.

There was a little discussion in their committee before this important step was taken, but the leading spirit of the club, an enthusiastic actor, settled the question by declaring that they were surely strong enough to be able to choose a private soldier, if he were a good performer,—especially as he was a gentleman by birth, too,—in preference to a bad actor, although he happened to be a deputy-commissioner—this being the other alternative.

The ladies were delighted with Corporal Bennett, he was so courteous, so thoroughly at his ease, without being forward; so good-looking, too, especially in powder. Who and what was he? A gentleman? What a romance! How miserable he must

be, poor fellow ! said they ; and under this idea Ronald was petted and talked to by the pretty amateurs, who ignored the fact that no trace of misery, or even of depression, was to be seen on his handsome face, and at last, in the fulness of their pity, they entered his name on the list of the Hubblepore theatrical club. He was in consequence forced to abandon almost entirely the soldiers' dramatic club, in which he had won his first laurels, but his comrades took his desertion as a matter of course, and contented themselves with chaffing him good-humouredly, after they had seen him play a lover's part with the prettiest girl in the station, who had indeed insisted on his taking it, in order to exclude a gentleman whom she disliked.

Ronald himself enjoyed his life amazingly,—he knew well enough that such opportunities would not have come in his way, had the regiment been at home, and

was quite sufficiently susceptible to the attention he received ; in fact, could Jamie Paterson have seen him as he strolled of an evening down the cross-road, by which the riders on the Mall were wont to pass, he would have laughed one of his broad laughs at the sight. The well-made uniform was worn so neatly, the glengarry was set so jauntily “on three hairs,” the natty little cane and well-kept boots made him altogether so unlike the Ronald he knew, who cared as little for his appearance as he did for the smiles of the professor’s daughters, who, however, if the truth must be told, were scarcely as fair or as piquante as the amateur actresses of the Hubblepore club.

Other attractions were not wanting, and perhaps, but for his boyish love, Ronald might have married the pretty daughter of the sergeant-major, whose battery was quartered beside the 2d, and, on getting his

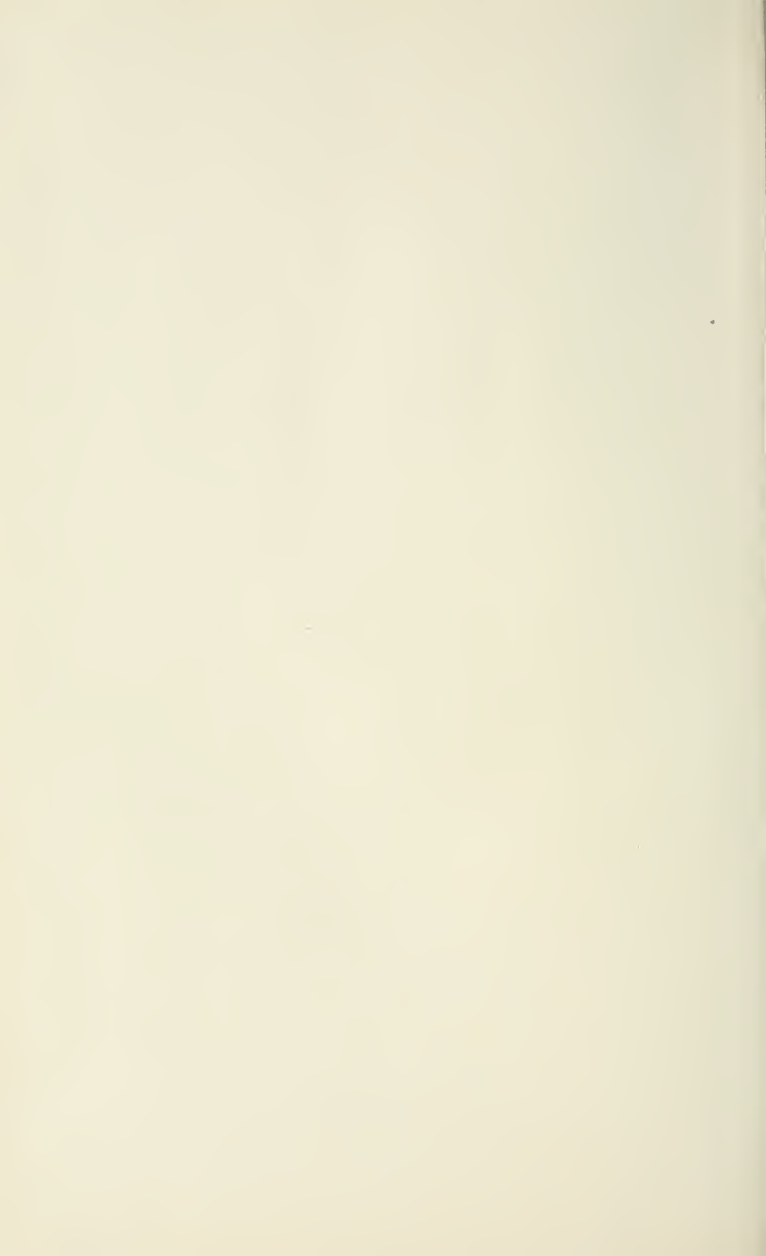
promotion, might have settled down as a member of the sergeants' mess. The girl was good as well as pretty, and thought more of the popular Corporal than was for her peace; nor did her friends fail to make him aware of the fact, but they did not elicit the response they hoped, and perhaps thought him conceited, whereas his genuine pity for the girl helped to cure that incipient failing.

It humbled him to feel that more unhappiness lay at his door than he had already caused in his far-away home, but he had no love to offer: he had loved Muriel Forbes, and though she was a dream of the past—a being quite separated in his mind from Mrs Leslie who had received him at Malta—he could not turn away from her and think of another woman as his wife.

So Ellen Smith braided her long fair hair, and wore her nice dresses in vain

when she went to the theatre, or to a soldiers' dance ; and though she had admirers in plenty, and was complimented till she was weary, neither her brown eyes, her ripe lips, nor her plump figure and good-tempered face made any impression on the obdurate heart of Corporal Bennett of the 2d ; and she had to learn her lesson of patience, with greater patience than he had bestowed on a similar page.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





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